



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

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## **THESIS**

**THE SHI'A CRESCENT: A MISCONCEPTION OF SHI'A  
ALLIANCE**

by

Rowaida Alamiri

December 2014

Thesis Advisor:  
Second Reader

Anne Marie Baylouny  
Mohammed Hafez

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**THE SHI'A CRESCENT: A MISCONCEPTION OF SHI'A ALLIANCE**

Rowaida Alamiri  
Civilian, Department of Defense  
B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2001

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**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL  
December 2014**

Author: Rowaida Alamiri

Approved by: Anne Marie Baylouny  
Thesis Advisor

Mohammed Hafez  
Second Reader

Mohammed Hafez  
Chair, Department of National Security Affairs

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Shi'a Crescent is a term used to refer to a region spanning three major countries: Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran. These countries each have a large and active population of Shi'a. Shi'a is one of the two main Islamic sects. The thesis finds the formation of a politically unified Shi'a crescent unlikely. It highlights the importance to regard Shi'a identity as a dynamic mechanism that can change the political stage in the Middle East. The study focused on the three intended countries of the proposed "crescent." Each was examined thoroughly and independently, in order to compare and contrast common concerns, interest, and circumstances that can lead to a possible unity of Shi'a in the region. Therefore, the research focused on three factors: sociopolitical representation, socioeconomic oppression, and the Shi'a identity. A greater emphasis is given to the reasons that lead Shi'a to maintain a distinct identity, rather than assimilating nationally, because maintaining this identity allows for bids for support and power beyond the state level. It is necessary for the United States to recognize that the regional uses of Shi'a identity have implications for the stability of the states.

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## LIST OF TERMS

Ayatollah	the highest religious rank in Shi'ism
Da'wa	the “call” in Arabic; a religious group
Hawza	a Shi'a religious school
Hussainya	Shi'a rituals mourning the death of the Prophet's cousins held annually
Marja'iyya	the religious source in Shi'ism
Mujtahids	Muslim jurists
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
Velayat-e-faqih	the rule of the Shi'a jurist as specified in Iranian constitution

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## **I. INTRODUCTION: THE SHI'A CRESCENT: A MISCONCEPTION OF SHI'A ALLIANCE**

The “Shi’a Crescent” is a term that refers to a region spanning three major countries: Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran. These countries each have a large and active population of Shi’a. Shi’a is one of the two main Islamic sects. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, unrest in the Middle Eastern region created new context for Shi’a political and social movements. This has drawn a new level of international interest in the capabilities of the Shi’a populations, both domestically and regionally. The United States has been especially interested in recognizing the possibilities of a Shi’a unification across state lines and the possibility of a political and military power shift in the region, the Council on Foreign Affairs explains: “Saudi Arabia and Iran have deployed considerable resources to proxy battles, especially in Syria, where the stakes are highest. Riyadh closely monitors potential restlessness in its oil-rich eastern provinces, home to its Shia minority, and has deployed forces along with other Gulf countries to suppress a largely Shia uprising in Bahrain....Iran has allocated billions of dollars in aid and loans to prop up Syria’s Alawi-led government, and has trained and equipped Shia militants from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan to fight with various sectarian militias in Syria”<sup>1</sup>. An analysis of the Shi’a structure in each of these countries reveals different contexts and motives domestically, which may override regional political ambitions.

Although this thesis finds the formation of a politically unified Shi’a Crescent unlikely, it highlights the importance in regard to Shi’a identity as a dynamic mechanism that can change the political stage in the Middle East. This thesis examines the reasons that led Shi’a to maintain a distinct identity, rather than assimilating nationally. Maintaining this identity allows bids for support and power beyond the state level. It is necessary for the United States to recognize that the regional uses of the Shi’a identity have implications for the stability of the nation states in the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. “*The Sunni-Shia Divide*”. Accessed November 23, 2014 [http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/?cid=otr-marketing\\_url-sunni\\_shia\\_infoguide](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide).

Immediately after the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, the Western world was suddenly and almost unanimously put on high alert from the threat of Islam and its fundamentalists. Countries in the Middle East, such as Iran, and its neighbors to the east, Afghanistan and Pakistan, had been considered a hotbed for Islamic fundamentalists and extremists personified by their Shi'a populations. Iraq, with its balance of Shi'a and Sunni populations, the latter of which had been the ruling power in the country for a longtime, had been considered a barrier to help fend off these extremists' ideologies and maintain a semblance of stability in the region. This barrier, however, had been considered somewhat fragile and in constant need of reinforcement, as the Iraqi former vice president, Tariq Al-Hashmi explains: "Sunnis had no other option but to defend themselves and use arms. We reached a point of to be or not to be"<sup>2</sup>. Once the Shi'a-Sunni civil war broke out in Iraq, it became apparent that this barrier may have finally been breached and that stability and security in the area was under imminent attack. Although the Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Iraq had very little direct impact on the United States and its allies, it represented a major threat to U.S. and Western interests abroad and required a major shift on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Many countries in the region, such as Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, and even Gulf countries, such as Bahrain and Qatar, were home to large populations of conservative fundamentalist Shi'a. These populations and their ideologies were generally less favored by Western governments, which considered them a threat to their interests in the region. Thanks to pro-West governments and oppressive regimes in the Middle East, these populations and ideologies were mostly kept silent and under control. Iraq's stability has been a signal of the stability of the Middle East; that is, if Iraq became disordered, the region's stability would at stake because Iraq borders Jordan on the west, Turkey on the north, and Iran on the East. Because Iraq is also a wealthy country because of its natural resources—such as water, agriculture, and, most importantly, oil—it has also played a major role in the region's politics. Its role became more apparent during the Iraq-Iran War as Iraqi Shi'a were accused of loyalty to Iran, which made it a strong, capable military force in the

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<sup>2</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "*The Sunni-Shia Divide*". Accessed November 23, 2014 [http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/?cid=otr-marketing\\_url-sunni\\_shia\\_infoguide](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#/?cid=otr-marketing_url-sunni_shia_infoguide). (Council on Foreign Relations)

region. Therefore, many countries within the region regarded Iraq as a model country for defense and a balancing power against external threats from countries, such as Iran or even Israel. The Shi'a-Sunni conflict in Iraq, however, once again represented a shift in balance and a major threat to the order of the country, and consequently, to the entire region. The civil war was viewed as a potential powder keg that could ignite instability in the Middle East and un-silence the Shi'a population.

The term Shi'a Crescent became popular as soon as the United States occupied Iraq. Some politicians believed that in case of a sectarian conflict in Iraq, there would be a strong possibility of a Shi'a emergence leading to the creation of a unified state or ally. This unification is supposed to occur when the Shi'a-led government in Iraq seeks support from and identifies with other Shi'a political and military powers in Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. These countries would form Shi'a heavily populated geographic "crescent-shaped" region spanning Iran, southern Iraq, and Lebanon. However, these countries are not the only states in the region with Shi'a populations. Other countries in the Arab peninsula, such as the Gulf States of Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar, and even Saudi Arabia, are also home to Shi'a groups.

Politicians are well aware of the potential impact this instability would have on other countries in the region, including but not limited to, Jordan and Israel. Comparatively speaking, Iraq has been a lesser of all evils to its Jordanian neighbor: with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict still ongoing, with Lebanon torn since its civil war, the presence of Hezbollah, and an oppressive Ba'athist party (a party born after the birth of Nasserist movement, and it called for the Arab nationalism) ruling Syria, this leaves Iraq as a source of very little headache. That, however, could quickly change with the rise of pro-Iran Shi'a movements that could extend into Syria and Lebanon and unify the Shi'a in the Middle East. It could also inspire Arab nationalism and an anti-West movement that could potentially take over what then would be the vulnerable country of Jordan.

The idea of a Shi'a Crescent is crucial, not only to the region, but also to global politics as well. This Crescent has the potential to spread quickly to countries where Shi'a are present. Most of these countries are located east of the Red Sea and are home to some of the world's largest and most important natural resources, including oil. This means a

successful Shi'a Crescent has the potential to control the entire region and, through its control of oil and other resources, would play an essential role in altering the world's dynamics.

#### **A. THE ORIGIN OF THE SHI'A-SUNNI CONFLICT**

The Shi'a-Sunni conflict originated from a division in the Muslim community about succession. When Prophet Mohamad received the first message from Gabriel, it was his immediate family, his wife Khadija and his cousin Ali and his best friend Abu Bakr who were among the first ten people to believe him. Abu Bakr was Mohammad's confidante and best friend for many years. He accompanied him in spreading Islam in Medina, and filled in for him in leading public prayers when Mohamad was extremely ill. Ali was also a strong believer in Mohamad. He was Mohamad's cousin, son-in-law, and the father of his grandchildren. Upon the death of Mohamad, there was a division in the Muslim community regarding who should be the Prophet's successor: Ali's followers and loyalists had strong beliefs that the next caliph must be a blood relative to the Prophet, whereas others felt more secure about Abu Bakr.

The outcome of this difference became the two main Muslim sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Each sect developed characteristics that paved the way for a larger gap between the two. The Sunnis are those who continue to abide by what Prophet Mohamad did and said in regard to matters of life; the Shi'a believe that the Qur'an never dies and therefore should be the source to refer to about matters of life. When many Muslims voted for Abu Bakr as the Prophet's successor, it was the first time the Shi'a felt they were unfairly treated. This became especially true when Abu Bakr recommended someone other than Ali to be the next caliph after his death. Since then, with the exception of Iran, the Middle East has been primarily ruled by Sunnis, who were often oppressive to the Shi'a.

As a result of this oppression and resentment, Shi'a rituals became symbolic representations of their religious beliefs and cultural identity, which they had been protecting for centuries. For most Shi'a, *Ashoura* and *Husseinya* rituals are significant. A person is not considered Shi'a unless he or she practices and values these rituals. However, to most of the Arab Islamic countries, these rituals are often viewed as extreme

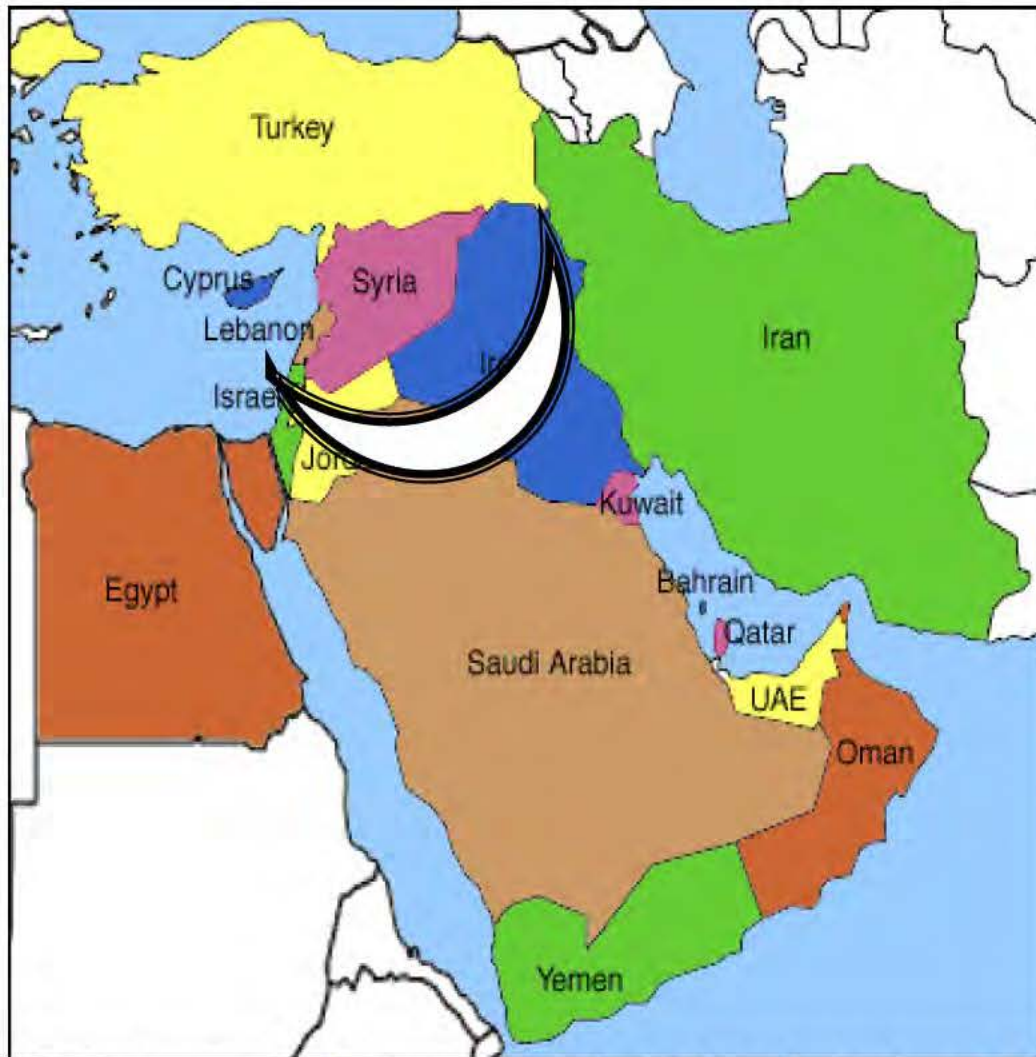
and unorthodox. As a result, the Shi'a seem to struggle to gain acceptance and recognition in these primarily Sunni-governed countries. Vali Nasr, in his book *The Shi'a Revival*,<sup>3</sup> examines the struggle behind the current Shi'a–Sunni conflict and the Shi'a's aim to rise and assert themselves in the region and to be accepted by the Western world.

Despite the Shi'a's religious beliefs, they do not shy away from helping and cooperating with Sunni-led governments. In fact, they typically display a great sense of nationalism and loyalty. Nasr points out, for instance, several incidents in which Shi'as fought for their Sunni-led nations and Sunni brethren against foreign threats, including in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, and, in the case of Iraqi Shi'a especially, the first Gulf War. In spite of Shi'a's loyalty, national pride, and their willingness to defend, they still have not been recognized or politically represented. Instead, they are often referred to in a derogatory way as “Farsi” and non-Arabs, accusing them of close ties to the Iranian radicals.

In spite of the continued Shi'a struggle to be accepted by other Arab Muslims and their failed advances to be recognized by the Western world, they have achieved remarkable successes in protecting their identity, history, and lineage as successors of Islam since the early division of the religion. These achievements, although they demonstrate a great sense of strength and character, have sometimes proven to be disadvantageous for the Shi'a quest. The Sunnis viewed this strong Shi'a bond as a threat to their own identity, and, perhaps, existence. This fear is not completely unjustified because the long-oppressed Shi'a may still be clamoring for the chance to overturn the Sunni governments. Nasr foresees a major turning point in the political future of the region as a consequence of the ongoing division. He believes that the Shi'a are certainly on a quest to gain more power in the region and, someday, to possibly rule it. This scenario would cause a major shift of power and destabilization in the region and therefore would require the United States to make drastic changes to its foreign policy. See Figure 1.

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<sup>3</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York, NY: W.W Norton & Company, Inc., 2007).



\*Map has been modified to include a symbol (added by author) to demonstrate the Crescent's physical location.

Figure 1. The Potential Shi'a Crescent: Iran, Iraq (South), and Lebanon (East)<sup>4</sup>

## B. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

The possibility of a Shi'a Crescent, or a Shi'a revival, raises two questions: 1) Do Shi'a in all three countries have enough commonalities to form a union? For instance, are Shi'a socioeconomic and sociopolitical standings sufficient grounds for a unification of Shi'a identity? 2) What dependent and independent variables can lead to or hinder the

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from "Map of Middle East," accessed 11/23/2014, <http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-1dLltT9NXkI/TpxQcfV3II/AAAAAAAAUeQ/a2BdHgrJqDg/s1600/map-middle-east-735329.gif>.



success of this unification? How can internal and external affairs play a role in shaping this unification? These questions highlight concerns on a regional level.

### **C. IMPORTANCE**

The United States needs to understand the possibility of a Shi'a empowerment because it creates opportunities for the United States in the region's politics. The importance of considering the Shi'a aim in achieving power and influence in the Middle East is perhaps best described by Nasr, who argues that the United States would have succeeded in Iraq had it given the Shi'a a chance to cooperate. Instead, because of fear and lack of trust, the United States did not provide any support to Iraqi Shi'a against their oppressive government.

Nasr warns of the military advantages of the Shi'a, which may lead to overturning of Sunni governments, and sees a major turning point in the political future of the region. Iran's strong military forces withstood a long and hard-fought war against Western-supported Iraq and are very capable of supporting Hezbollah through military training and/or equipment. Iran can also provide Hezbollah financial assistance thanks to its large production of oil and other resources.

The purpose of the thesis is to examine and analyze the strength of commonalities among the Shi'a, including socioeconomic settings, identity, and military power, in the three Crescent-associated countries, and their capability or incapability of forming a unified power.

### **D. PROBLEMS AND HYPOTHESES**

In conducting the research for this paper, it is evident that Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon have fewer common factors than what appears on the surface. In reality, the Shi'a community in these countries has a different motive to rise. In Iran, the motive is expansion of the Shi'a Persian Empire, more so as a defensive mechanism against foreign (Western) threats; in Iraq, the motive is to achieve governmental power and enhance socioeconomic status, whereas in Lebanon, Shi'a are in need of more recognition, representation, and education.

The hypothesis of this paper foresees separate Shi'a revivals in each of the three countries, and not necessarily on the regional level. In fact, the current revival is only gaining added attention because these uprisings are occurring at about the same or within a short period of each other. However, there is no evidence that these movements continue to evolve after achieving their initial goals domestically. In other words, once the Shi'a in both Iraq and Lebanon have reached their target goals, it is unlikely they will act as a unified people and influence or impact the rest of the region.

## **E. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As ground-breaking as the idea of a unified Shi'a Crescent may be, there are several studies that have counter-argued and dismissed this notion. Many of the material written about this subject are full of controversy, making it essential to examine and carefully research the available texts and evidence.

By far, most of the literature that examines Shi'a focuses on the transitional socioeconomic and political transformations within each of the three Crescent-representing countries. Numerous texts and publications support the notion of acceptance of Shi'a within predominantly populated Sunni regions and governments.

In the book, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*,<sup>5</sup> Kramer reviews the history of Shi'ism and the role of the Shi'a's main clerics known as *Marja'*. He defines the *Marja'* as: "an institution that reproduces itself through the sometime harsh factional struggles regularly opposing contenders for religious authority." Evidently, main heads of the sect were initially aiming to influence the area spanning Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) extending to Jabal Lebanon (south of Lebanon). He points out periods in history where Shi'a had succeeded, to a certain extent, in reaching their goals. For instance, the author examines the Safavid Empire of modern Iran and its social, political, and economic achievements. The Safavid used their success in educating Shi'a within the Empire and the surrounding areas, according to Kramer's quote of Arjomand on page 70, "With the establishment of the Safavid Dynasty (1501–1722) in Iran and the subsequent

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<sup>5</sup> Kramer, M. (Ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*. (London, England: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1987) 88.

transformation of Shi'ism into the Iranian state religion, Iran became the main center of Shia learning, attracting many of the most qualified scholars of the Shi'a world."<sup>6</sup> This had marked Iran as the Shi'a center during that time, which may have contributed to the Iranian influence on the Shi'a community from then until today.

In addition, Kramer highlights the significant role of *Marj'a*, particularly in Lebanon, albeit as less of a religious entity and more of a political one. In fact, when Kramer speaks of the Shi'a community in Lebanon, he does not see a direct correlation of the Shi'a's current situation to its improved economic status. Instead, he relates the Lebanese Shi'a's past shortcomings to the lack of political representation among a multisectarian population in a country, such as Lebanon, which has strong political representation for all other sects except the Shi'a.

Furthermore, Kramer, like many other authors and experts on the topic, has agreed that Shi'a in the entire Gulf region, which he refers to as the center for Shi'a, have been neglected on both the political and economic fronts. This negligence has been ongoing since Prophet Mohamad's death, whereas research and writings on the Shi'a dilemma in the region did not start to draw attention until after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

Graham Fuller and Francke Rend Rahim see Shi'a as victims of the successive governments in the region, indicating that "The Shi'a point to a pattern of negligence and poverty resulting from discriminatory practices of governments from Ottoman times into the modern era."<sup>7</sup> These perpetual discriminations against Shi'a have left them with the sense of victimization and leading them to seek self-worth through protection of their identity. Fuller and Rahim continue: "Reinforcing the cultural-religious dimension of Shi'ite identity is their social identification as the poor and uneducated, the underclass of the Arab world stretching from south Lebanon to Bahrain."<sup>8</sup> However, in response to the significantly active role of Shi'a in Bahrain highlighted by Kramer, Fuller and Rahim

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<sup>6</sup> Kramer, *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Graham E. Fuller and Francke R. Rahim, *The Arab Shi'a the Forgotten Muslims* (New York, NY: St. Martin Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 241.

argue that Shi'a in Iran and Lebanon are more dissatisfied with the Western world and the United States than are Shi'a in Bahrain and other Gulf countries, "Of all the Shi'ate communities in the Gulf and the Arab world, it is perhaps the Iranian and Lebanese Shi'a who have grounds for the greatest grievances toward the West."<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his writing, Kramer points out that Shi'a in Bahrain are not particularly regarded as more important or less rebellious than those in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. In fact, he continuously reminds us of the few occasions in which Shi'a in Bahrain protested against their ruling governments. Shi'a revolutions and rebellion against their own governments are not only caused by their respective state's negligence, but also in part by the negligence and consolation of the Shi'a continue to receive from Western governments and the United States—especially when their ruling governments are supported by the West. Therefore, in addition to their non-Shi'a governments, the Shi'a's hostility, ill-will, and grudges are very often directed against the Western world and the United States.

Shi'ism has had deeper roots within the Iranian society since the success of the Safavids. The Safavid Empire is described, by more than one author, as one of the most fertile eras in Iran's history, especially on the Shi'a political authority front. The establishment of many educational institutes and the blooming of textiles provided Iran's Shi'a with great enthusiasm that instilled will and confidence in them to aim for political authority. Cole and Keddie<sup>10</sup> state that upheavals and the Islamic revolution placed Iran in the spotlight of the international community, which did not welcome such a revolution, especially when it succeeded without the need of any foreign aid: "The Iranian Revolution was therefore atypical not only in its internal revolution but also in its apparent detachment from the broader international context within which Iran found itself and which played such an important role in most other revolutions."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, once the Islamic Republic of Iran was established, the Iranian authorities have been seeking to expand their ideologies outside Iran, according to Cole and Keddie, "Since 1979, the

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<sup>9</sup> Fuller and Rahim, *The Arab Shi'a the Forgotten Muslims*, 241.

<sup>10</sup> Cole, J. R., *Shi'ism and Social Protest*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 1986.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

Iranian government has announced numerous measures of support for Muslim groups struggling abroad against oppressive governments.”<sup>12</sup>

The case of Shi’a revolts and government dominance in Iran differs completely from the Shi’a scenario in Iraq. These differences can be outlined in two categories: The influence of religious institutes and the tribal social structure of the Iraqi society. Unlike Shi’a in Iran, the Iraqi Shi’a have been historically regarded as second-class citizens, both academically and socioeconomically. They have been excluded from high-profile official positions in the government and the Iraqi armed forces until recent years. Even then, their inclusion was met with challenges. Although Iran may be considered the center of Shi’a in the region from a political power and influence prospective, Iraq represents the center of Shi’a *Marja’* and pilgrimage for many Shi’a of different countries in the region. This is because Iraq has the Shi’a’s most important shrines, which are primarily located in Iraq’s central provinces of Najaf and Kurbala. Early Shi’a scholars and *Marja’* had established religious educational institutes and centers that taught scholars about Islam and Shari’a law from the Shi’a prospective. This religious influence’s establishment in the region created a threat to the successive governments of Iraq. Because the majority of the Shi’a scholars come to Iraq from or through Iran, the Iraqi ruling governments had isolated the Shi’a in society, often accusing them of loyalty to Iran and disloyalty to Iraq despite a lack of evidence. In fact, antagonism caused a gap between Iranian and Iraqi Shi’a for many. Ironically, as stated by numerous authors, it was not until the Ba’athist rule in Iraq that the close relationship between Iranian and Iraqi Shi’a scholars improved primarily from political reasons. Eventually, the network between the two populations has grown as a result of exiled Iraqi ‘*ulama* entering Iran and Iranian Shi’a envoys and scholars continuing their religious education in Iraq: “In October 1965 the Arif government allowed the exile Iranian ayatollah, Ruhullah Khomeini, to come to Iraq to live and teach. Ayatollah Khomeini attempted to woo Najaf’s senior ‘*ulama* into political action against the Shah of Iran but got a frosty response from Ayatollah al-Hakim and hence from other Iraqi ‘*ulama*.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cole and Keddie, *Shi’ism and Social Protest*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 140.

Shi'a in Lebanon did not suffer from the second-class citizen classification to the same extent as those in Iraq did, per se. The negligence encountered by the Lebanese Shi'a was not intended to directly cause their Shi'a; rather, their struggle was mainly the result of their passive role in the country's politics. Therefore, the Shi'a in Lebanon have been more in need of an active political representation, which it lacked primarily for two reasons. First the occupation of Lebanon by external powers, such as the Ottomans, who are Sunnis, decreased the possibility for Shi'a to be directly involved in politics. In addition, the French favored the Maronite Christians: "The Maronite Christians, who had been the strongest group in the previous regime in Mount Lebanon, remained the strongest local group in Greater Lebanon. The major threat to the new French-backed regime emanated from the Sunnis of the coast, who agitated to resume their previous links with the Syrian interior."<sup>14</sup> Second, the Lebanese Shi'a remained passive in the political arena. As a result, "The two groups of Lebanese Shi'a took little part in the events that led to the establishment of a new, [inter-sectarian] political system in the central parts of Mount Lebanon from 1585 on."<sup>15</sup>

Consequently, when Musa al-Sadr came to Lebanon in 1959 to become the new Lebanese Mufti (religious expert and authority who issues fatwas), the Lebanese Shi'a community rapidly responded to his desire to improve their role in Lebanese society and politics. Al-Sadr's first step was to underline the significance of education among the Shi'a community in an effort to increase their self-confidence: "He [al-Sadr] generated a sense of indignation among the community about their lowly position in Lebanese society and stimulated the belief that they could indeed do something about it through non-revolutionary political action."<sup>16</sup> This new attitude gradually led to the establishment of Amal and later Hezbollah.

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<sup>14</sup> Cole and Keddie, *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, 139.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## **F. METHODS AND SOURCES**

The method employed in conducting the research for this paper will be a comparative multiple case study. The qualitative method is essential in conducting the study to analyze motives and patterns of behavior in each country. The study will focus on one particular time frame, the twentieth century, which provides eminent and numerous pieces of evidence of the contemporary socioeconomic and political challenges as well as military changes in the countries being studied and the entire region.

## **G. THESIS OVERVIEW**

By tracing all of these factors, we can explain that the declaration of a Shi'a Crescent is simply intended to put the international community's awareness on high alert and raise attentiveness to the critical situation facing Jordan, especially considering its geographical location. It does not necessarily infer a true shift of power and dominance, or even a threat, in the region.

Many researchers have agreed that, throughout history, Shi'as were suppressed by successive ruling governments in the region, and, therefore, they will stop taking the opportunity to rise. In fact, Nasr indicates that the Safavid Empire aimed at expanding the empire to include modern Iraq.<sup>17</sup> However, Faleh Jabar<sup>18</sup> reveals in his book that Shi'as were excluded from governmental positions, better education systems, and higher wages in Iraq for a long time. Augustus Norton agrees with Faleh in the latter's assessment of the Shi'a history in Lebanon; he<sup>19</sup> sees the Lebanese government's negligence of Lebanese Shi'a encouraged the development of the Amal Movement and Hezbollah. King Abdullah of Jordan's declaration of a Shi'a Crescent formation is still vague, regardless of whether the collective Shi'a rise is a form of revenge against Arab- and Sunni-led governments. Brenda Shaffer<sup>20</sup> suggests that there are challenges ahead if such

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<sup>17</sup> Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival*, 70.

<sup>18</sup> Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London, England: British Library Cataloguing in-Publication Data, 2003), 203.

<sup>19</sup> Augustus R. Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Brenda Shaffer, "Shi'ae Crescent Might Not Be What It Seems," *Baltimore Sun*, April 25, 2007.

a formation were to take place; but she too fails to analyze what would have led to King Abdullah II's declaration and his perception of a possible Shi'a Crescent.



## II. IRAQ

The Shi'a revival and government takeover in Iraq was an unexpected, yet major shift in the region's politics. It has changed the dynamics of main powers, lit up, once again, a sectarian conflict that has been buried for centuries, and challenged the region's economy. But, it was inevitable that if the Shi'a were to revive, it would be the Iraqi Shi'a who would start it, for they have been the most oppressed. They have been deprived of equality on many levels: politically, economically, and educationally. The lasting oppression by Iraqi and foreign occupiers' governments was due to fear of the Iraqi Shi'a's loyalty to Iran. Are political and socioeconomic deprivation, and the Shi'a identity, sufficient factors to convince Shi'a in Iraq to unify with other Shi'as in the region? This chapter examines the Shi'a in Iraq regarding political consideration, socioeconomic status, and that country's perspective on the Shi'a identity during three major political eras: before Ba'ath rule, under Saddam's rule, and after Saddam's rule.

Iraqi Shi'a only became a threat to governments in early 1920s. It is unknown whether their early actions were merely defensive and as tools for liberating Iraq from foreign occupation and suppressive government, or, whether these justifications were a method to pave the way for possible unified Shi'a influence and authority. Regardless of the true motives, the consequences of such periodic upheaval remain applicable until today. Shi'a in Iraq were suppressed on different political and socioeconomically levels, which eventually led to fewer educational opportunities as well. Iraqi Shi'a often encountered suspicions by fellow citizens and government leaders. Their initial rebellion, led by the *Mujtahids* (Muslim jurists), raised skepticism toward the true fidelity of the Iraqi Shi'a after their association with Iranian *Mujtahids*, in addition to the long religious conflict between Shi'as and Sunnis. Therefore, subsequent ruling governments of Iraq, whether national governments or foreign occupations, have always seen Iraqi Shi'a as a serious threat for coups. Thus, despite the many various ruling governments in Iraq within the past century and a half, the Shi'a were neglected, isolated, and rarely trusted.

## A. IRAQI SHI'A PRE-BA'ATH PARTY (1900–1968)

This section deals with the period between 1900 and 1968, during which Iraq had two successive occupations: the Ottomans and the British. During this time, the Iraqi Shi'a were experiencing an inequality of political representation and socioeconomic status, and they struggled to maintain Iraqi nationalism.

The Ottomans, who were Sunnis, divided Iraq into regions in 1875, during their last few decades in the country, decentralized the government, challenged Iraqi nationalism, and politically discriminated against Shi'a. Before the Ottoman rule, Iraq was governed by its many tribes through one main representative for each, who served as the head of the tribe or *Shaykh*. The *Shaykhs* still played a major role during the Ottoman conquest of Iraq. The Turks selected and appointed heads of government in three major provinces, dividing Iraq into three regional areas: north, middle, and south. So, Iraq during the Ottoman rule was ruled by regional governments that were not linked or connected to a centralized government that considered and ruled Iraq as a whole. Therefore, it was more like three small separate states rather than one country: Mosul in the north, Baghdad in the middle, and Basra in the south. The regional governor's main concern, although he did not belong to a centralized government, was to stay in power and keep his appointees (the Ottomans) satisfied. This regional division also divided Iraq religiously (into Sunni–Shi'a and Christians demographics) and sociolinguistic ally (Iraqi subdialects, Kurdish and Turkish). The decentralization of the government and regional division of ethno-religious populations threatened the Iraqi nationalism. It was also during this period that Iraqi Shi'a witnessed the first form of political discrimination because they were not considered regional *Shaykhs*.

The Ottoman division of Iraq into regions led to social isolation of the Shi'a and hindered them economically. The Shi'a's lifestyle had been relatively secure economically, but the new system cut them off culturally from education and advancement. The Shi'a long-time practice of farming granted them the opportunity for agricultural expansion. Sluglett describes that the Ottomans had little control over lands,

because they were protected by tribes.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime, the flourishing economy and literature occurring in Iraq and elsewhere in the region excluded Iraqi Shi'a. According to the Ottomans, the Shi'a profession of farming did not require education. Furthermore, these rural areas, which brought a great deal of revenue to the Ottoman rulers in Iraq, lacked civil services, including schools, hospitals, and mosques. Rural areas were mainly populated by Shi'a. The constant neglect and isolation of these communities led to the Shi'a to develop their own cultural habits and traditions and become disconnected from urban services and lifestyle.

The new economic development appealed to the British, who started showing an interest in Iraq, particularly Basra, as a port for their merchants and merchandise from and into India. When the British conquered Basra in 1914, the Ottomans withdrew from Iraq, leaving it to British rule. After the British occupation, it was the Shi'a who first raised concern about a sovereign and independent Iraq; they especially regarded the non-Islamic occupancy of their country as a threat to their faith and identity. Being occupied by non-Islamic elevated the desire for Iraq independence. In 1920, Shi'a and Sunnis aimed to unify, for the first time, to fight against the British; and they succeeded, although such unity was not long-lasting: "By late July much of the mid Euphrates region was in the hands of the rebels. This set-back for British control gave heart to others to revolt...."<sup>22</sup>

This revolution was perceived as a threat in many ways: first, the British did not expect the rebellion to start from Najaf and Karbala—south provinces of Iraq—and to extend to Baghdad. Second, the Sunnis sensed a Shi'a threat because the call to rebel against the British was initiated by Shi'a *Mujtahids* and started in Najaf and Karbala, the two Shi'a shrine cities in Iraq. Third, the Shi'a leaders in the Kut and 'Amara provinces opposed the revolution and worked "against it."<sup>23</sup> These leaders were the beneficiaries of British rule in Iraq. This revolution was, or seemed to be, the first opportunity for Iraqi

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<sup>21</sup> Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958 from Revolution to Dictatorship* (New York, NY: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Shi'a to form a centralized, powerful Shi'a authority in Iraq in accordance with Shi'ism theology. The main issue, aside from resistance from other groups, was the divergence among Shi'a soon after the death of their highest religious leader, Shirazi, in 1920. Another problem was the questioned legitimacy of Iraqi *Mujtahids* versus Iranian *Mujtahids*, who were supposedly in Iraq to support the *Mujtahid* mission.

The gradual withdrawal of the British resulted in the crowning of King Faisal I in 1921 to rule Iraq. He was first perceived by Iraqi Shi'a and Iraqi *Mujtahids* as a politician who would support and protect the Iraqi Shi'a against the British occupation and the Wahhabis, a conservative Muslim group.<sup>24</sup> However, this perception was wrong. The King was alarmed by the Shi'a potential; therefore, his first act was to exile the Iraqi *Mujtahids*, in particular those of Iranian origin, and accuse them of loyalty to Iran rather than Iraq. In a struggle for religious power, the *Mujtahids* were forced to flee to Iran, and Iranian *Mujtahids* disputed certain religious aims and practices that were to be implemented for Shi'a practices. Some *Mujtahids* pled with the King to grant them a return to Iraq.

The Shi'a were not as much of a threat and were not as strong as initially perceived. This became apparent through the division among the *Mujtahids*, who were considered the head of and served as a resource for the Shi'a followers, led to the weakening and disappointment of the Iraqi Shi'a community in 1921. Also, the Shi'a uluma (Muslim legal scholars) acknowledged that such a strong Shi'a unification between Iranian *Mujtahids* and Iraqi Shi'a was unlikely to happen at the time and identified obstacles or "weaknesses" that could hinder such a unification as "...ethnic, linguistic, and cultural."<sup>25</sup> Once the King was aware of these weaknesses, he changed his strategy toward the Shi'a, which led to a transformation in Shi'a-state relations. He granted the Iraqi *Mujtahids*, and Shi'a in general, positions in the government to give them a sense of authority, recognition, and, most importantly, to win them over and expand the gap between the Iraqi and Iranian *Mujtahids*.

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<sup>24</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 77.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 86.

Faisal then appointed a highly regarded clergyman, Muḥamad Baqr-al-Sadr, to serve as a mediator between the Iraqi Shi'a and its government. Although the King granted Sadr a level of religious authority in the government, Sadr became almost the only religious authority for the Iraqi Shi'a. This decreased the authority of the sayyids, who were tribal counselors on marriages, divorces, and inheritances,<sup>26</sup> and marked the success of the Sunni monarch in Iraq in separating the state from religious or radical religious views. This appointment of Sadr encouraged the Shi'a to be more flexible about their religious and political goals.

The King was not only successful in laying out such a strategy, but also in selecting Sadr to hold this position. Sadr, while maintaining open-mindedness on Iraq's policies that neglected the Shi'a, also won the hearts of many Iraqi Shi'a through his philosophical and religious writings; he became an idol to be followed to many Shi'a, according to Nakash: "al-Sadr was said to have been calm, deliberate, and sound in his judgments."<sup>27</sup> Also, he became the head of the Al-Da'wa party (some literature suggests that he founded the party), which was Islamic-based rather than political, and sought to establish an Islamic state. Its name in Arabic means "the call." However, its structure and means of formation infer are interpreted differently. Sadr used his religious authority in the government to raise awareness of the significance of educating his fellow Shi'a. He became a respected person among Shi'a, and their admiration for his writings encouraged them to seek education. This popularity continued for two decades.

Several countries in the Middle East during the 1950s witnessed a strong wave of nationalism and Arab-nationalist awakening. The rising of Nasserism—the following of Gamal Abdel Nasir—in Egypt led to the formation of the Ba'ath party in Syria and then Iraq; these movements were pan-Arab. Iraq, too, was drawn into this awakening. This marked a turning point in Iraq's political history. These movements called for the overthrow of foreign occupiers and the expansion of communist ideology among Arabs. This permitted some secularism. In addition to the elevated level of education among

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<sup>26</sup> Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Hanna Batatu, "Iraq's Underground Shi'a Movements: Characteristics, Causes and Prospects," *The Middle East Journal* 35, no. 4 (1981): 580.

Iraqis, these factors set the stage for the first political coup in Iraq. The coup was led by officers, among them Shi'a, who ended the kingdom and announced Iraq as a new republic in 1958. Sluglett describes this moment as follows: "Qasim and 'Arif appeared on television ..... and declared that a popular government under a republic would be inaugurated and called for maintenance of order and unity.....[m]artial law was declared a few hours later."<sup>28</sup> In the years that followed, the region, including Iraq, struggled to assert itself nationally and religiously in its battle against communism. During this time, extremist religious formations were born throughout the region; Da'wa formed in Iraq during the early 1960s.

## **B. THE SHI'A TRAPPED UNDER THE BA'ATHISTS' AND SADDAM'S GOVERNANCE**

During the period between 1978 and 2003, Shi'a in Iraq experienced severe political oppression under the Ba'athist and Saddam Hussein's governments. During this period, the Iraq-Iran War intensified Shi'a-state relations and Saddam legislated banning of Shi'a celebrations. This led to a Shi'a resistance and uprising in 1991.

This section discusses the fear of the Ba'ath party of a Shi'a coup, the role of Iran, and the Shi'a attempt to stage a coup against Saddam. The Ba'ath party came to govern Iraq in late 1968, and the status of the Shi'a was at stake. Despite the Ba'ath's slogan that called for unity in the nation, Ba'athist leaders seemed threatened by the organized Shi'a community, despite it being loyal and dedicated to Iraq's two intellectual scholars: Ayatollah al-Sadr and Ayatollah al-Hakim.

The success of Shi'a social development, especially in building educational institutions in a short time, drew Ba'athist attention. For more than a decade, Iraqi Shi'a had succeeded in building primary and secondary education schools and a few institutes that specialized in teaching Shi'a theology that welcomed foreign students. The Ba'athist opposition to the Shi'a's institutions began by closing the schools, preventing the building of a university planned in Kufa (south of Iraq), forbidding foreign students from attending Shi'a schools, and forcing Iraqis who were attending these schools to enlist in

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<sup>28</sup> Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958 from Revolution to Dictatorship*, 2001, 49.

the Iraqi military.<sup>29</sup> At this point it was clear to the Shi'a leaders that the new government was working against them. So, the leaders, Sadr and Hakim, decided to split the duties in raising awareness among their fellow Shi'a. While Hakim resided in Kadhimiya in Baghdad, where the shrine of Kadhim, a Shi'a imam, is and mostly populated by Shi'a, Sadr went to Lebanon to ask for foreign help from other Islamic nations and mostly the "Shi'a supreme council headed by his cousin Musa al-Sadr [in Lebanon] to campaign against the Iraqi government."<sup>30</sup> Ironically, only four Islamic countries responded to the call "on moral grounds," and only one of those has a Shi'a majority among its populous. Iran was not one of the supporting nations.

A social movement that spread throughout Baghdad's neighborhoods, especially Shi'a districts, had alerted the ruling party of the potential of a Shi'a coup. However, when Shi'a leaders organized these movements, they were not aiming at or planning a coup against the Ba'athists—at least there is not enough evidence suggesting such a plot. Their main aim was to rebel against the British presence. The Ba'athists' tactic next was to weaken the Da'wa party because it was religious and more sectarian focused. The Ba'athists accused Da'awa members of being loyal to and affiliated with Iran; as a result, Ba'athists executed some Da'wa members and its scholars. Sadr did not give up, instead continuing with his enthusiasm toward educating the Shi'a community. By publishing his work "al-fatwa al-wahida," he received more admiration from the Shi'a and was regarded as their leader.<sup>31</sup> Soon, Ba'athists tried to ban Hussainya processions, Shi'a rituals mourning the death of the Prophet's cousins that is held annually by millions of Shi'a both inside and outside Iraq. This ban confirmed Ba'athist discrimination against Shi'a, and Sadr issued a fatwa against joining the Ba'ath party.

Iraqi provinces and neighborhoods that were mostly populated by Shi'a resisted the Ba'athists attempts to end Shi'a celebrations. Areas like Najaf, Kurbala, Kut, Nassryia (south of Iraq), and Thawra City in Baghdad resumed the annual processions

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<sup>29</sup> Talib Aziz, "The Role of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25, no. 2 (1993): 211–212.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 213.

despite all forms of harassment by the Ba'athists. This created tension between the Ba'athists' government and the Shi'a, and led to a disconnection between these cities and the rest of Iraq. By late 1970s, a great deal of tension had built up between the Shi'a community, its leadership, and the Ba'athists; hundreds of Shi'a were executed by order of courts, and Sadr was kept under house arrest.<sup>32</sup> The religious leader Ruhullah Khomeini in Iran sent messages to Sadr encouraging him to stay in Najaf and applauded his leadership for the Shi'a community in Iraq; these communications were used by the Ba'athists to convince Iraqis of Sadr's disloyalty to Iraq and faithfulness to Iran. In fact, Khomeini received his education in Islamic studies and Shi'a theology and received his religious rank by advancing his studies in the city in Najaf, where he resided for a number of years; he thus held strong attachment to these cities and his Iraqi Shi'a scholars.

The Ba'ath's hostilities even reached top Shi'a clerics in Iraq by being sent into exile or being murdered. Any Iraqi citizen that had ties with either Iran or active Shi'a members were also targeted. When al-Hakim fled to Iran, Sadr was secretly executed by Saddam's regime in 1980. The news of his death was broadcast to Iraqis by Khomeini, who also delivered a message to all Iraqis to depose the government; this caused great grief and resentment in the Shi'a toward the Iraqi government. By now, the Shi'a community had no religious leader and Saddam's regime continued its efforts to wipe out the Da'wa party. The regime succeeded in its mission against the Da'wa party by killing thousands of its active members and supporters in the early 1980s and deploying more than 130,000 Iraqi nationals of Iranian origin to Iran.<sup>33</sup> After the Iraq-Iran War started, Saddam's regime encouraged Iraqi men who were married to Iranian women to divorce their wives for a sum of money. The regime also sent Shi'a, along with other Iraqi sects, to fight the Iranians to protect—although it was more likely meant to “prove”—their “Arab identity;” planted secret service informants in Shi'a neighborhoods, shrines, and

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<sup>32</sup> Aziz, “The Role of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980,” 213.

<sup>33</sup> Ofra Bengio, “Shi'is and Politics in Ba'athi Iraq,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 21, no. 1 (1985): 6; Aziz, “The Role of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980,” 217.



places of prayers and lectures; and degraded the status of ‘ulama by considering them employees instead of holy men.<sup>34</sup>

It is likely that Saddam, by employing ‘ulama, wanted to control their religious addresses and lectures and hence prevent any possible attempts to organize for the overthrow of government. Shi’a community was completely repressed by the regime within the first two years of the Iraq-Iran War. During the eight years of war, the regime kept a closer eye on the Shi’a population; they are Iraq’s majority population and therefore of its armed forces, yet, officers of these forces were dominantly Sunnis: “[A] growing number of Shi’a officers were promoted to positions of prestige and responsibility in which they demonstrated their competence and loyalty in the war against Iran.”<sup>35</sup> This, however, created a division in regard to social, economic, and educational levels between urban and rural Shi’a, who remained neglected by the government. This was especially true of those living in the marshlands and the Shatt-el-Arab area, which were frontiers of many battles during the Iraq-Iran War because of their strategically critical border locations and the nature of their geology, which made battle difficult. Drying of the marshlands in 1991 out of fear of a possible Shi’a uprising against the government had negatively impacted the Shi’a and added to their tension against the government; the Shi’a most likely felt betrayed because they had fought in the war against Iran but once the war was over Saddam’s government returned to its original persecution of them.

The suppression of the 1991 Shi’a uprising in Iraq brought Shi’a–Saddam’s regime relations to a climax that could not be forgotten by either side. As mentioned previously, Saddam’s retaliation against the Shi’a was to dry the marshlands located southeast of Iraq between Iraq and Iran and populated by Shi’a. The marshlands were not only a home for its inhabitants, but also their source of food; they knew the marshlands and knew them well. Because Shi’a native of the marshlands supplied their own food by raising and hunting livestock, they found themselves having no choice but to flee what

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<sup>34</sup> Aziz, “The Role of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980,” 225.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 238.

became arid lands. Their departure to nearby cities did not serve them; rather, it became a struggle for them and the residents of these areas: “In the marshes, they had neither school nor hospital. None of them had university diploma or a profession....they had a very hard time assimilating, and many became involved in theft and brawls.”<sup>36</sup>

Iraqi Shi’a may have miscalculated when selecting the time of their uprising to be right after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait; the Arab region was too mad to grant support and Iran had just come out of a long war. Shi’a, who knew that Saddam’s regime was too infiltrated among the people for them to plot any action—and therefore relied on external assistance from neighboring countries and international alliance—did not consider that neighboring countries, such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and even Egypt, disliked Shi’a as well and were not going to support another enemy just to defeat Saddam, who in any case seemed to them defeated at that time. Iraqi Shi’a again felt betrayed and isolated by their own nation and Arabs. In fact, Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak had made a statement to a television channel accusing Shi’a, in general, of being loyal to Iran.<sup>37</sup> It was evident that Saddam had tried to prove to Iraqi Shi’a that, without his government, they are unable to function and be live independently in Iraq.

But this did not mean that while Saddam was ruling as a complete dictator that he was completely successful in containing all Shi’a opposition and movements. In fact, in addition to the southern provinces in Iraq, which are mostly populated by Shi’a because of major Shi’a Imams and Prophet’s family members living there, Saddam failed to contain a small district in Baghdad called Thawra City. Not only was this district Shi’a-populated, but its residents were also adherent to their Shi’a identity, beliefs, and rituals. These features made that district the most neglected in Baghdad in terms of civil services and education. Saddam’s hope of controlling and causing these Shi’a to denounce their true Shi’ism led to the opposite. Now, Saddam had a district that harbored a great resentment toward him, yet was a strong, close community because as all of its members had common struggles and sentiments against Saddam. Throughout the years, there were

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<sup>36</sup> Aziz, “The Role of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr in Shii Political Activism in Iraq from 1958 to 1980,” 238.

<sup>37</sup> Abbas Kadhim, “Shi’i Perceptions of The Iraq Study Group Report,” *Strategic Insights* VI, no. 2 (2007): 5.

exchanged maneuvers between Saddam's security forces and Thawra City residents. This district was never contained by Saddam, and thus, it always left him with some fear of a coup by Shi'a against him. In fact, he even changed the name of the city from Thawra, which means "revolution," to Saddam City.

### **C. POST-SADDAM: CHALLENGES FOR IRAQI SHI'A CONTINUE**

The circumstances in Iraq had given Iraqi Shi'a a time to reflect and prepare for a change in government, especially between 1991 and 2003, but they were not ready to rule. This section of the chapter highlights the division within the Iraqi Shi'a and the role of each party's ideology, history, and association with non-Iraqi Shi'a plays. These parties include the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Da'wa, and Sadr's movement.

Perhaps the time period between 1991 and 2003 for Iraq's Shi'a was a time of reflection and preparation for an opportunity that it was inevitably waiting for: a coup or the fall of Saddam. Also, it may have deeply carved the Shi'as' sentiments of resentment toward Saddam's government, the Arabs, and possibly adding a new enemy, the United States. The fall of Saddam has not brought rest to Iraqi Shi'a, however, or at least, not yet. In fact, to a certain extent the period between 2003 until now has highlighted the dilemma of the power struggle and divergence amongst Shi'a. Although these differences seem to be mainly political and the religious practices and ranks have remained, to a great extent, the unifying factor of these different Shi'a parties in Iraq, as Terrill describes it, is "Competition for religious leadership in some cases political power, rapidly materialized among clerics as the posture situation unfold."<sup>38</sup> The following paragraphs examine the primary Iraqi Shi'a political parties and the circumstances associated with each that hinder the conclusion of a unified Shi'a structure in Iraq.

#### **1. SCIRI and the Badr Brigade**

The SCIRI seems to be the most balanced party of all the Shi'a parties in Iraq. Despite its highly trained militia by the Iranian Guards, the SCIRI proved to be capable

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<sup>38</sup> W. Andrew Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries," 25, February 2004, <https://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi>.

of playing the role of mediator between the American forces in Iraq and the resentment of the Iraqi people. Although the SCIRI continues to refer to the American forces as an occupying force, it has not issued a fatwa encouraging Iraqis to combat against the American and allied presence. Rather, the SCIRI has called for diplomatic and peaceful venues to end the occupancy: “SCIRI has continued to assert the importance of not combating the U.S. occupation forces with force until all political and diplomatic means for ending the occupation have been exhausted....and refer to Iraq resistance fighters as ‘terrorists,’”<sup>39</sup> because they also kill many Iraqi civilians in the process.

However, although the SCIRI is diplomatic and moderate in its approach to politics, its stance during the Iran-Iraq War and its connection to Iran still stirs major confusion among Iraqis. While in Iran, the SCIRI maintained a good relationship with the Iranian government, received military training, and was able to broadcast from Iran against the Ba’athists in Iraq. However, during the First Gulf War, SCIRI then-leader, Ayatollah (the highest Shi’a religious rank) Mohamad al Hakim, had to flee to Iran because of “persecutions” by the Ba’athists against Shi’a scholars. Another downside to the previous cooperation between the SCIRI and Iran’s government was the establishment of the Badr Brigade, the SCIRI military force: “The Badr Brigades were originally recruited, trained, and equipped by Iran’s hardline force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps [IRGC], during the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war. The Corps consist of thousands of former Iraqi officers and soldiers who defected from the Iraqi army, Iraqi refugees, and Iraqis who fled the country and join SCIRI.”<sup>40</sup> These former, yet serious, linkages with Iran means the SCIRI is perceived with skepticism by Iraqis, despite the SCIRI’s endless efforts to supposedly “de-militating” the Badr Brigade and distance itself and its politics from those of Iran’s.

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<sup>39</sup> Terrill, “The United States and Iraq’s Shi’ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries,” 26.

<sup>40</sup> “Global Security Organizaion,” November 24, 2014, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/badr.htm>.

## **2. Da'wa Party**

The Da'wa party is well-recognized among Iraqis for its long, brutal history with Saddam's government, but it is also recognized for its extremism and bias with Iran. Because there has been a long association and military training by the Iranian Guards, its Iraqi loyalty is often questioned. Eventually, Saddam ordered every person who became a member of the Da'wa party to be persecuted; around 77,000 people were persecuted or killed in the battle against Saddam's regime, according to the Da'wa.<sup>41</sup> Others were harassed and sent into exile in Iran, which led to the establishment of the Da'wa party and its attempts to counter the rapid expansion of communism among Iraqis in late 1950s. It was officially established in 1958 as a radical religious political party; having such an extreme motive made this resented not only by Saddam's government but in all Iraqi governments since 1958.

The brutality against this group of Shi'a continued to include various forms of harassment and discrimination, including the inability of Da'wa members to enlist in Iraqi military forces, attend certain colleges, and receive equal opportunity of employment and education. This included enrollment in theological institutions: "The harassment of the clergy escalated and led to the closure of previously flourishing theological institutes."<sup>42</sup> These discriminating policies forced Da'wa members to live in concentrations in Baghdad. Thawra City was one of the main clusters and it became, as mentioned previously, a main source of concern and trouble for Saddam. Led by Mohamad M. al Sadr, Da'wa was also influenced by the Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979. Da'wa then started a series of attacks, although none was successful. As a result, Saddam ordered al Sadr and his older sons to be publically executed in 1979.

The execution of al Sadr by Saddam forced Da'wa members to seek refuge in Iran. Al Sadr's death echoed among his supporters of the Shi'a communities in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Iran was very willing to provide shelter for Da'wa members to protect them, but also as a means of propaganda against Saddam's regime: "Alongside members

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<sup>41</sup> Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries," 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 8.

of the SCIRI, Da'wa member also received intensive training from the Iranian army. What differentiates Da'wa from the SCIRI is their expansion through refuge in other neighboring tremendous pressure, Da'wa did take refuge in Iran, but it also established a presence in Syria, Lebanon and eventually Britain.”<sup>43</sup>

Da'wa had more obstacles to presenting itself as a powerful national political body. Residing in different countries, and being limited in mobility and expression for those members who continued living in Iraq as fugitives, naturally caused the party to fracture. Among those factions was Iraq Hezbollah, which, not surprisingly, was influenced by the Lebanese Hezbollah leader and founder, Mohamed H. Fadlallah. Da'wa's external influence by a religious-political party, such as Hezbollah, in addition to their ties to the Iranian government and clerics, although downplayed by Da'wa members, and the party's extremist religious views made it challenging for the Da'wa party to win the public opinion and support and succeed in expansion influence over or holding a place in the government.

### **3. Sadr Movement**

Sadr's Movement is another Shi'a religious, political, and militia group that has struggled to prove itself as an efficient power to rule or decide for Iraq, mostly because of the weakness of its young, arrogant leader and his failure to establish networks in the region. Despite its strong presence since 2003 and its aggressive role in mainly fighting the U.S. forces in Iraq, this movement heavily relies on its historical fame. Muqtada al Sadr is the youngest son of Mohamad M. al Sadr, who was executed by Saddam, and the cousin of Ayatollah Musa al Sadr, founder of the Amal Movement in Lebanon who brought the Lebanese Shi'a to recognition and actualizing political power. This cavalier background made it easier for Muqtada al Sadr to start with a popular party filled with loyal supporters. He immediately he created a small group of militia called the al Mahdy Army, supposedly as a resistance force against the United States. In the same year, he left Iraq for Qum, Iran, to continue his theological studies. While trying to maintain a good rapport with many of Shi'a ayatollahs in Iraq as well as Iran, he has encountered much

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<sup>43</sup> Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries," 24.

resistance and doubt. Highly ranked Shi'a clergymen may have found Muqtada al Sadr to be motivated by emotions and youth rather than religious and political wisdom: "Sadr is also known to be ruthless, and has been accused of being involved in the high profile murder of a returned Shi'a exile leader Abdul Majid al Kho'ei."<sup>44</sup> Such perceptions made Muqtada al Sadr more inclined to seek the support of Iran and its ayatollahs to prove himself. He affirmed his intention in adopting Iran's concept of ruling to govern Iraq and make it an Islamic republic. Among the Iraqis, Muqtada al Sadr has failed to acquire any political position. Sadr and his army al Mahdi are blamed for inciting and being involved in violent acts against Sunnis; in fact, may have intentionally targeted or besieged some Sunni neighborhoods: "His militia killed thousands of Iraqis and Western soldiers .....so the prospect of their resurgence frightens Iraqis (especially Sunnis) and Westerners alike."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Sadr's efforts to maintain a close relationship with Ayatollah al Sistani, a nationalist Shi'a, and al Ha'iri, who has close ties with Iranian leaders—both are highly ranked and therefore highly regarded by many Shi'a—have countered his efforts to appear as an independent, nationalist, reliable leader. He is opposed in Iraq, Iran, and even Lebanon via Hezbollah. Aside from his hurdles in establishing a balance and asserting himself among the Shi'a community, he also seems to have suffered pitfalls regarding funding for his army.<sup>46</sup> Regardless, al Sadr is still influential among Iraqi young men for his zealotry, and support from the youth who may emulate him for being a young, confrontational, and direct in his opposition to U.S. forces, in addition to his legendary family history in their dedication to Shi'ism.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

It is unlikely that Iraqi Shi'a will become unified with Shi'a from another country for a number of reasons: they share the country with Sunnis and other religious and ethnic groups, they are too fragmented to form a unity within their own sect, and their historic associations with Iraq were the results of imposed circumstances.

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<sup>44</sup> Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries," 17.

<sup>45</sup> The Economist, "Iraq's Clergyman: Muqtada al-Sadr, Back in Business," May 5, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Terrill, "The United States and Iraq's Shi'ite Clergy: Partners or Adversaries," 21.

The Shi'a struggle for power and control over Iraq prepared a civil war theater between the two dominant Muslim sects: the Sunnis and Shi'as. Bloody, violent activities bombarded Iraq in just about every province, although some were more violent than others. Being the largest sect residing Iraq, and due to their hunger for power and authority, the Shi'as surge came on too strong, with different policies and in different phases, including that the different Shi'a organizations each have their own well-trained militias. Sadr's movement for instance acted in matters of authority and claimed governance before any legal, formal, or informal declaration of government: "Sadr's Army and organization grew alarmingly in size, muscle and daring. In a Taliban-style for social power, they seized public buildings, beat up moderate professors, took over classrooms, forced women to wear the hijab, set up illegal sharia courts, and imposed their own brutal penalties."<sup>47</sup> The country's demography was tolerant toward a sectarian violent break-out.

The Sunnis' awareness of Shi'a demographics prevents them from taking any uncalculated measures toward Iraq. The majority of Shi'a reside in Iraq's southern provinces, and Iraq's southern border also borders Iran. For Sunnis, who were enraged at losing their ideal ruler and supporter, Saddam, it is threatening the believe that: first, the Shi'a will take control of Iraq and retaliate thereafter; second, the Shi'a are armed and supported by Iran; and third, the United States will also support Iraqi Shi'a in organizing a proxy-war against Iran. Consequently, Sunnis, who populate the west and northwest Iraqi provinces, raced to arm as many as possible as a means of creating a frontier against Shi'a. Soon, al-Qaida and Wahhabi groups intervened and made the situation even worse. Since the toppling of the Saddam's regime, Iraq has been on the verge of a civil war and sectarian violence continues daily.

Another factor to be considered is that Iraqi Shi'a are unable to unify either their objectives or their policies regarding how to rule Iraq and win the trust of its citizens. In fact, their divergence into smaller groups and followers of certain clerics are just means of expressing their motive: power. Aside from the different factions of Iraqi Shi'a are

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<sup>47</sup> Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq? *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 5 (2004): 40.



secular Shi'a and Shi'a–Sunni intermarriages that populate large areas of Bagdad. Neither population is seeking to abide by a religious state or become a replica of Iran, although many of these two populations have sought refuge abroad because of the sectarian violence that occurred after 2003. The migration of secular groups and intermarriages among families allowed the migration of more extremist Shi'a to Bagdad from other provinces. Some Shi'a groups have been violent and even extreme in their religious beliefs. Moreover, the Shi'a loyalty to Iraq has been questioned by the former regime of Saddam, who often referred to Da'wa and Shi'a in general. This repeated allegation has stuck in the Iraqi citizens' minds and may provide a basis for other minority ethnic and religious groups to justify their opposition to Shi'a ruling. At the same time, it has also brought questioning of Saddam's plot to set the stage for a sectarian conflict after his departure. This put all Iraqi ethnic and religious-sectarian groups on alert for who will control Iraq and how will it protect the rights and ensure the equality of all Iraqis.

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### III. LEBANON

The Shi'a in Lebanon share some aspects of neglect with the Shi'a in Iraq, but they also share political dynamics that would prevent them from forming a union with either Iraq or Iran. First, the Lebanese Shi'a are dependents of other foreign aid and influence. Like Iraqi Shi'a, they lack unified objectives, methodologies, and strategies. This chapter highlights the Lebanese Shi'a's struggle to rise—socially, economically, and politically—without external support. The Lebanese Shi'a's progressions are examined through three different periods of the country's history: after the arrival of Sadr, the civil war era, and the birth of Hezbollah.

The Lebanese rulers' neglect of the Shi'a was not necessarily intentional, but had consequences. Some circumstances that prevented the Shi'a from achieving recognition included foreign occupation, external influences, and inter-sectarian conflicts. Lebanon's geographical and demographical demarcation also played a role in isolating the Shi'a community. This chapter examines why the Iranian Shi'a, represented by Amal and Hezbollah, are too dependent and unlikely to unify with Shi'a in either Iraq or Iran.

Lebanon's then new borders, as demarked by the Sykes Picot Agreement,<sup>48</sup> created domestic and regional complications for the country. The agreement led to the demarcation of Lebanon's borders. Since its creation and division from Balad al-Sham (the states of Levant),<sup>49</sup> Lebanon was intentionally designed to be a fragile state and to serve as bridge for access at times of conflict in the region—especially those that rose between France and Britain as occupiers the Middle East in the early twentieth century. Not only did the Sykes-Picot Agreement separate Lebanon from modern-day Syria, it also was not created geographically to become a wealthy country as far as resources are concerned. Another factor that led to a feeble Lebanon was its ethnic proportions. Muslims and Christians almost divide the country's demographic in half; nevertheless, each religious group contains many sects. Table 1 indicates the various inter-sectarian groups.

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<sup>48</sup> An agreement signed in 1916 by the British and French to divide the Arab states, under the Ottoman ruling at the time.

<sup>49</sup> The Levant region consisted of Lebanon, Jordan, Syrian, Israel, and Palestine.

Table 1. Lebanon's Sectarian Groups as of February 2014<sup>50</sup>

<b>Muslim population and sects</b>	<b>Christian population and sects</b>
<b>59.7%</b>	<b>39%</b>
Sunni	Maronite Catholic
Shi'a	Greek Orthodox
Druze	Melkite Catholic
Isma'elite	Armenian Orthodox
Alawite	Roman Catholic
	Chaldean
	Assyrian
	Coptic
	Protestant

In 1926, it became imperative to write a Lebanese constitution, which was done and implemented in the same year. It acknowledged the necessity of all sects to coexist in order to unify and keep Lebanon as one country. Most Arab countries that had their constitution written at that time were under some foreign influence: the British, French, or Ottomans. Therefore, like any other constitution written under such political control, the Lebanese constitution, too, lacked the ability to determine or specify coexistence in terms of governance, demographic distributions, and representation of its ethnic groups. The constitution seemed to serve Lebanon, however, or may have allowed Lebanon to survive with domestic instability while under the occupation of the French until 1943.

Once the French withdrew from Lebanon, inter-sectarian issues started to surface. Shortly after Lebanon received its independence from France, the Lebanese National Pact (al Mithaq al-Watani) was created; only Maronites and Sunnis were included in the discussions. Minimizing the representation of the Shi'a, despite their equal proportion with Sunnis in the country's population, described the U.S. Department of State as (each making up 27% of the Muslim population),<sup>51</sup> the National Pact also limited the presidency of the country to a Maronite Christian who could override or veto any parliamentary decision. From the Shi'a's perspective, this affirmed the negligence of their community from the Shi'a's perspective: "The National Pact—built on centuries of

<sup>50</sup> "Lebanon Demographics Profile 2014," 2014, [http://indexmundi.com/Lebanon/demographics\\_profile.html](http://indexmundi.com/Lebanon/demographics_profile.html).

<sup>51</sup> "Lebanon," accessed February 2, 2014 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171739.pdf>.

exclusion, marginalization, and under representation—created a deep resentment of the Lebanese ruling sects and developed a perceived identity crisis within the Shi’a community.”<sup>52</sup>

The year 1959 is an important year in the history of the Shi’a in both Iraq and Lebanon. In Iraq, 1959 marked the dominance of the Ba’ath Party, which continued to oppress the Shi’a. In Lebanon, however, it marks the revival of the Lebanese Shi’a because of the arrival of a Shi’a Imam (higher clergy man), Musa al-Sadr. Unlike the negligence of the Shi’a in Iraq, the negative treatment of the community in Lebanon was more obvious. Although the Shi’a were later recognized by the Lebanese National Pact as the “third most important ethnic group demographically,<sup>53</sup> it did not receive the political and socioeconomic attention due its significance. This led the Shi’a to accelerate their motives toward political change and insertion into the Lebanese political system. They remained peripheral for a long time and began to surface only after the Shah of Iran was indirectly involved in speaking for them.

The geographical location of the Lebanese Shi’a supported the movement; the Shi’a populate the southern border of Lebanon, which is shared with the then-new Israel. The increased tension and resentment of the Shi’a, in particular, toward the Sunni assured a conflict. The creation of Lebanon’s new southern neighbor, Israel, expanded on this tension and made it more definitive. The establishment of Israel was not necessarily a direct motive for the Shi’a’s movement, but rather an indirect one. Because many Palestinians were either forced or voluntarily had to flee their country to reside in southern Lebanon, where many of them still live, they had to share land and resources with the already poor and neglected Shi’a. Moreover, the presence of Israel in the region gave Iran a second reason to have an indirect influence on Lebanon’s politics. Iran used this as an excuse, claiming the support of the “Shi’a brothers” to help them receive their economic and political recognition. The evolution of the Lebanese Shi’a can be reviewed during three main sociopolitical events in the country’s history.

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in James B. Love, *Hezbollah: Social Services As a Source of Power* (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2010), 7.

<sup>53</sup> “Lebanon.”

## **A. THE ARRIVAL OF IMAM AL-SADR AND THE FORMATION OF THE AMAL MOVEMENT**

The arrival of Imam Sadr to Lebanon revived the Shi'a on all levels: it gave them a sense of self-esteem, identity, and political representation; in return he gained respect and support until recent years.

Sadr used Islamic beliefs and laws to reform the Shi'a community. The Shi'a remained inactive until the arrival of the high-ranking cleric Musa al-Sadr, who had gained the loyalty of the Shi'a community in the region. Through him, Iran sought to intervene indirectly in Lebanon's politics. Sadr received his advanced religious education in Najaf, a southern province of Iraq and Qom, southwest of Tehran the Iranian capital, where he also resided for some time. Sadr received great respect at first because of his religious education degree, which allowed him to gain support and empathy from the Shi'a. Sadr started to gradually improve the socioeconomic status of the Lebanese Shi'a. He noted that areas where the Shi'a resided in Lebanon were lacking simple and basic services, and he supported the expansion of education and educational opportunities. To educate Lebanese Shi'a and to establish basic services and schools, al-Sadr needed to acquire some form of funding structure that he could rely on. For this, he turned to Islam by reemphasizing the importance of charity (Zakat), and reminded the Shi'a community, with references to verses in the Qur'an, of the importance of supplying the poor: "...the Shi'a were considered the poor cousins in the multi-congressional political system that had formed during the twelfth century."<sup>54</sup> Zakat in Islam means the support of the needy; thus, funds started to flow.

Sadr immediately realized that, to obtain respect, recognition, and political power in the Lebanese government, and to increase employment rates among the Shi'a, educating them had to become his first priority. He succeeded in institutionalizing the Shi'a community to a great extent from its previous status: in 1960, he built a vocational school in southern Lebanon that is still in existence; he continued the social work of

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<sup>54</sup> Talal Nizameddin, "Squaring the Middle East Triangle in Lebanon, Russia and Iran-Syrian-Hezbollah Nexus," *The Slavonic and East Europe* 86, no. 3 (2008): 481.

charity and philanthropy to provide the basic needs to the Shi'a areas; and he established the Islamic Shi'ite Higher Council that represents the Shi'a community.<sup>55</sup>

Sadr's success granted him much appreciation from the Shi'a; his efforts gradually elevated their living conditions and their self-esteem. Despite his higher education in religious studies, mainly Shi'ism, Sadr was known to be moderate in his practices, a feature for which he was well-regarded, not only by the Shi'a community in Lebanon, but also by the Shi'a in Iraq and the Shah of Iran. His main concern in Lebanon continued to be the overall improvement of the condition of Lebanese Shi'a. Finally, he created Harakat-al-Mahrumin (the Movement of the Deprived) in 1974 to seek political recognition in the Lebanese government: "he vowed to struggle relentlessly until security needs and social grievances of the deprived—in practice the Shi'a—were addressed by the government."<sup>56</sup>

Sadr unintentionally put into place the foundation and model for other Shi'a organizations to follow, such as Amal and Hezbollah. Through continuous lobbying, Sadr was able to receive the Lebanese government's recognition for Shi'a representation in the position of the Speaker of the Parliament, which was then, and still is, a limited position. Nevertheless, this was promising and progressive from the Shi'a's perspective considering their previous status. Although Sadr achieved the political representation he desired for the Shi'a, his main concern remained to develop their socioeconomic status, which continued to recover.

Sadr's methodology in Lebanon was to distant himself from the country's politics, on a national and an international level. As a result, did not get too involved in the overall politics of Lebanon and what pertained to the Lebanese struggle with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in southern Lebanon; rather, he remained focused on his goals for the Shi'a community. His Shi'a support continued to grow until his mysterious disappearance in 1978, which caused the Shi'a community to become more unified,

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<sup>55</sup> Love, *Hezbollah: Social Services As a Source of Power*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Norton, *Amal and the Shi'a Struggle for the Soul of Lebanon*, 47.

especially after they won the position of the Speaker of the Parliament, which meant they at last had a voice in the government.

The Shi'a community became more independent and started to organize its society as institutions for civil rights as well as defensive militia. Afwaj-al-Muqawama, known as Amal, for instance, was organized to continue carrying on the mission of al-Sadr, to ensure the education of the Shi'a and better standards of living, and to defend Shia' from the new enemy, Israel, across the Lebanon border. This provided both a motive and valuable opportunity by the PLO to gain the sympathy and support of the Lebanese Shi'a. Amal and the Shi'a in general, who had been neglected for so long, felt the need to gain military power as well as political presentation. It was the PLO who granted them an opportunity to do so.

## **B. THE CIVIL WAR (1975–1992)**

This period of Lebanon's history brought many domestic, regional, and foreign affairs to a climax. The Lebanese Civil War had advantages and disadvantages on the Shi'a community in Lebanon. The country's already complicated politics and multiethnic governance continued to hinder the stability of the Shi'a community in the country. Evidence shows that the mostly Christian-dominant Lebanon during the twentieth century had higher employment rates for Christians than for Muslims, and that among Muslims there was a higher percentage of Sunnis than Shi'as. Additionally, education was also a problem for Lebanon's diverse religions and sects. During Lebanon's occupancy by the French, Lebanese Christians received their education while studying in France because they were better off financially. The Muslim community, however, felt threatened by the presence of Western culture in the country. Muslims wanted to preserve their religious rituals, traditions, and culture. At the time, Muslims educated their children at established Arabic or Islamic schools, either Turkish or the Farsi schools in the region. Nevertheless, educational opportunities inside the country were lacking, and the few that existed were externally influenced: "[The French....establish[ed] the University of St. Joseph in 1875. In 1960, a Muslim religious endowment opened the private Arab University of Beirut.... The American University of Beirut (established in 1866 as the Syrian Protestant College)



is comparatively more cosmopolitan, with students who are Sunnis, Shiites, Druzes, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant.”<sup>57</sup>

The presence of the Palestinian refugee camps at Lebanon’s southern border added to the fragility of the country and further split the Sunni and Shi’a communities. The Lebanese government did not allow Palestinians to integrate with its own citizens, because doing so would have changed the country’s demographics and make Muslims the majority.<sup>58</sup> Palestinians, however, were not content to reside in refugee camps; they wanted to fight Israel by using their convenient geographical location from southern Lebanon. However, neither the Lebanese government nor any of its powers had an interest in initiating any form of battle or war against their southern neighbor, Israel. The Palestinians soon formed the PLO, also called the Popular Front, to fight from where they were living in despair. For the PLO to continue its fight from the Lebanese borders (Lebanese government did not reciprocate such actions), it was necessary for the new organization to receive support from the Lebanese citizens to be able to move more freely. But the PLO also wanted to create division in the Lebanese society that would preoccupy the government with domestic concerns rather than the Palestinian camps and their military plans.

The ongoing Palestinian–Israeli tension across the Lebanese southern border erupted in numerous Israeli attacks and hostility in southern Lebanon, where the majority of Shi’a resided. This caused the Shi’a to flee to Beirut. Once more, migrating and settling in the suburbs of Beirut kept the Shi’a marginalized. Because most of those who migrated were farmers, they lacked skills, education, and resources: “The poverty belt around Beirut was inhabited by the [Shi’a] from South Lebanon and their coreligionists from the Beq’a Valley of eastern Lebanon, who had migrated voluntarily in search for better opportunities.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Latif Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1998), 56.

<sup>58</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon 1970–1983* (London, England: Cornell University Press Ltd., 1984), 40.

<sup>59</sup> Abul-Husn, *The Lebanese Conflict: Looking Inward*, 62.

The Shi'a succeeded in achieving political acknowledgment, but encountered a drift in religious beliefs. The new lifestyle and their thirst for a political voice caused many of the Shi'a community to become attracted to communism, which prevailed at the time, and its political reforms in the region. Amal was not pleased with the shift in the political direction of the Shi'a community and planned to redirect those who were interested in joining the communist party to join his movement instead. Many Shi'a were motivated to join Amal's movement as a means for political and military representation. These social and political changes allowed external influences on Lebanon's politics, and eventually, led to a civil war.

The break out of the Lebanese Civil War brought the significance of the Shi'a role to the country's politics and internal stability. Although the precise cause of the Lebanese Civil War has not been clearly identified, it is clear that external and internal politics paved the way for its eruption. Many researchers and politicians believe it was due to the presence of foreign actors, such as the Palestinians and Syrians, and the influence of previous occupiers, such as the French and Ottomans; however, some believe that the Lebanese National Pact did not distribute political representation fairly. The National Pact did not operate as a healthy system of checks and balances, as presented, in the structure of "mutual veto, proportional representation, and segmental autonomy... Most of the politicians and major political parties criticized the pact on the ground that it failed to attain the original goal of creating a unified and cohesive nation."<sup>60</sup> This led to the expansion of the existing gap and tension between Lebanon's different ethnic groups. Most certainly, the presence of Israel and the sharing of the Lebanese southern border contributed largely to both the breakout of the civil war and the presence of the Syrian army in Lebanon.

One of the most important roles of the Lebanese Shi'a in Lebanon is their role in defending the borders. Although Israel felt it was necessary to attack and occupy Lebanese villages in southern Lebanon, supposedly for Israel's own security, Syria also felt the necessity to protect itself and Lebanon, which was in the middle of civil war at

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 85.

the time, from further occupation. Syria was also interested in weakening Lebanon's internal politics in order to have more influence; thus, Syria decided to support the Shi'a, with whom it shared a border. Another outcome of the Lebanese Civil War was the training of some pan-Arab Shi'a by Palestinians in their fight against Israel.

### **C. THE FORMATION OF HEZBOLLAH**

Various interconnected circumstances are examined here that led to the birth of Hezbollah, the domestic and regional perceptions on the new party, and failures and success of Hezbollah's allies. One of the outcomes of the Lebanese Civil War, although indirect, was the founding of Hezbollah. Hezbollah can be described as a "double-agent" because it remains loyal to Iran and Syria, but also claims to be the defending front for Lebanon's sovereignty. During and after the civil war, Amal became weaker because of disrupted focus; namely, the Shi'a community. Amal became distracted by internal fights, taking sides, and settling differences with Palestinian resistant militia groups residing in Lebanon. At the same time, Shi'a scholars who had been studying in religious-Shi'a schools in Najaf, south of Iraq, returned; the current Hezbollah leader, Hassan-Nasr-Allah was one of them.

The Iraq-Lebanon-Iran Shi'a identity network was building slowly, but continuously. The Shi'a scholars who had returned from Iran were not only influenced by their studies, but also by Iraqi Shi'a scholars who resented the Iraqi government for escorting al-Khomeini back to Iran. This had left many Shi'a scholars angry because they viewed this act toward the Ayatollah to be disrespectful and limiting to all Shi'as' religious practices. The agony of the returned Shi'a scholars was matched by internal political incidents in Lebanon: the ongoing civil war has left Lebanon more ethnically and politically divided. Such events presented a young Shi'a scholar, Nasrallah—described as "revolutionist" by Norton—the opportunity to idealize another Shi'a group with a more military focus than Amal.

The new Shi'a "revolutionary" group successfully initiated the Hezbollah party for many reasons. In the southern part of Lebanon, where most Lebanese Shi'a were still residing, Hezbollah presented itself as a defensive force against the violations of Israel

against Lebanon and its southern borders, in particular. In fact, Hezbollah refers to itself as “Islamic Resistance.” This patriotic slogan was also appealing to Syria, who found the young enthusiasts just as protective of Syrian borders against Israeli aggressions; it was also a political distraction to Lebanon and justified its military presence there. Norton also states that: “Supporting Hezbollah allowed Syria to maintain its alliance with Iran, gain the means for striking indirectly at both Israel and the United States and keep its Lebanese allies, including Amal movement, in line.”<sup>61</sup>

On the other hand, Iran’s interest in supporting the young Hezbollah party was at first purely religious; “[T]o spread the message of the self-styled ‘Islamic Revolution.’”<sup>62</sup> However, Iran’s support of Hezbollah was not consistent. In fact, there was a shift in its support as soon as its leader changed. Despite the reduced support of Iran, Hezbollah kept strong ties with Iran, who it regards as an Islamic state model and a counselor for its political initiatives. In reality, the Lebanese Civil War continued until the early 1990s, despite the numerous attempts to stop it. Finally, all parties involved had met and agreed on the “al-Taaiif” accord, which set a condition that all militia members be disarmed. Hezbollah agreed to the accord, but claimed that it was essential for the party to keep its arms because it is a resistance party: “Hezbollah,...signed on to the accord only after the Iranian government gave its blessing, justified the maintenance of its armed forces by calling them ‘Islamic resistance’ groups, not militias, committed to end Israel’s occupation.”<sup>63</sup>

Gaining the support of the main players in the region, such as Iran and Syria, provided Hezbollah a strong role in the region’s politics. But in fact, it was Hezbollah’s achievements against Israel that idealized its presence in the country and the region as a whole. These achievements were not regarded as actions undertaken by a group of Shi’a, but rather by a heroic party the Arab region needed: in a number of incidents, Hezbollah

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<sup>61</sup> Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 83.

succeeded in restraining Israel and brought about desirable results for the Lebanese community (for example, the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon).

Hezbollah got a chance to prove itself as a resistance force against Israel when Israel occupied southern Lebanon during the Litani operation in an aim to keep the Palestinian attacks as far as possible from its inhabited areas. Despite the numerous attempts by different political and militia groups to liberate southern Lebanon, it was Hezbollah's tactics and resistance that led eventually to its liberation: "By the 1990s,...Hezbollah was carrying out most of the attacks, each appearing to have been characterized by careful planning and well-practiced professionalism....[I]ts deadliest [attack] was so unexpected that Israel did not even know initially how it had happened and for years persisted in saying that the explosion was caused by a 'gas leakage.'"<sup>64</sup> Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000. This allowed many Shi'a who had been forced to leave their home to return to their properties. This in turn led to the party's more influential power and charisma in the region and among the Lebanese; moreover, Hezbollah continued its dedication toward Lebanese Shi'a by building schools, providing jobs, and offering health care.

Hezbollah strives to keep its image as a religious, political, and military resistance to foreign involvements. It justifies its military actions against Israel as resistance: more passive and reflective rather than taking the initiatives of arranging and planning for targets. Politicians debated the presence of Hezbollah (who later became characterized and listed as a terrorist group) in Lebanon as a potential obstacle for the country's stability and foreign relations. Hezbollah's popularity may be derived from its successful resistance to Israel, but it is also a source of blame for attacks against Lebanon: "When Hezbollah's fighters carry out attacks against Israeli soldiers, the civilian population of South Lebanon often bears the brunt of Israel's reprisals...Israel has targeted civilians in an attempt to turn them against the Islamic Resistance."<sup>65</sup> The July war in 2006 between Hezbollah and Israel is an example; it lasted thirty-three days and caused both Israel and Lebanon great casualties, affecting both countries' economies.

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<sup>64</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Falah Jabar, "Family, Faith, Force," *The World Today* 60 no. 10 (2004): 22–23.

Today, Hezbollah has succeeded in attaining seats in the Lebanese Parliament and achieving a political role in Lebanese politics. Yet, it is not the only Shi'a representation in the Lebanese Parliament; Amal is just as vocal. Amal is supported mainly by its good relations with other ethnic political groups. It also keeps the original objectives of its founder Musa-al-Sadr: educating and providing social services to the Lebanese Shi'a community, but it cannot compare to the efforts of Hezbollah. Hezbollah is supported by large sums of money from Iran, estimated at \$100 million a year.<sup>66</sup> Hezbollah assures that its subordinates are living well.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The case of the Lebanese Shi'a reveals common roots with other Shi'a in the region, but it also reveals their weakness as an independent power or society, preventing them from being unified with other Shi'a. The Shi'a in Iraq and Iran are a religious group, but they are not a dominant religious group in Lebanon. They are indifferent in their political views and biases, domestically and regionally. Their loyalty is scattered between their Shi'a identity, nationalism, and the country that supports them financially, which is Iran.

Moreover, there are many variables that bring the sturdiness of Hezbollah into question. First, the Lebanese political system is sensitive to the country's multiethnic and religious nature. These ethnic groups are also present in other countries in the region, such as Syria, Iraq, and Jordan; consequently, they are influenced by external affairs. Second, Lebanon's weak economic system makes it prone to external influences. Saudi Arabia and Iran often support Lebanon economically; however, there are conflicts of interest and sectarian tension between these two aiding countries. Given the circumstances, it is difficult for Lebanon to ignore either country. Third, the role of Iran in supporting Hezbollah infinitely is not assured. In the past, Iran supported the Amal movement led by the late Sadr. It was considered necessary to raise their voices, and then the identity, of Shi'a in Lebanon. However, when Amal did not satisfy Iran's interest in the country or region, Iran supported the founding of Hezbollah: Iran's political and

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<sup>66</sup> Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, 110.

financial support to Hezbollah added to the gap between the two Shi'a groups. Fourth, the ongoing tension between Hezbollah and Amal over political views speaks against unification between them. Additionally, other Lebanese ethnic groups and their stance toward Hezbollah are indifferent.

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## IV. IRAN

This thesis treats Iran as an independent variable in analyzing the possibility of a unified Shi'a power. Iran is the only state in the region that identifies itself as an "Islamic Republic"; has a constitution, regardless of number of revisions; strictly adheres to Shi'a Islamic laws; has the only Shi'a military power; has a stable economy as one of the oil exporting countries; and has influenced sectarian uprising in other countries.

The situation of the Shi'a in Iran does not correlate to their life and circumstances in both Iraq and Lebanon. Although the Shi'a in Iraq and Lebanon were victimized socioeconomically and socio-politically in Iran, they have had the status of power and authority. Historical studies indicate that Iranian political strategies are motivated by the need to protect and preserve their independent identity and to bring back the Persian Empire; thus, their motive toward the rise of Shi'ism is politically driven. It is important to also stress that the Shi'a in Iran are the majority, "inasmuch as about [89]<sup>67</sup> percent of the people of Iran are Shi'is and Shi'ism is the official religion in Iran."<sup>68</sup>

The Iranian Shi'a political complaints are not limited to Sunni rulers, they also include the Arabs. Historically, this resentment goes back to the Persian Empire, which stretched from today's Libya to Pakistan, including Iraq. Some countries like Egypt and Syria were part of the Byzantine Empire until the spread of Islam. By the time Islam had arrived to the area, there had been major social and political shifts and Arabic had become the prominent language of the region. Because many Iranians had converted to Islam, the Farsi language relied heavily on using the Arabic script. Iran's geographical location among numerous Arabic-speaking countries mandated that it distinguish itself from the Arab world and maintain its own non-Arab identity. Moreover, Iran also wanted to force its sociopolitical influence on the Arab region. On the other hand, the Arab rulers, who have mainly been Sunni, used sectarianism to distance Iran from the Arab

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<sup>67</sup> "Factbook/Iran," accessed November 18, 2014, [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/countrytemplate\\_ir.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/countrytemplate_ir.html). The figure of 89 percent has been updated from the original.

<sup>68</sup> Yahya Armajani, *The Modern Nations in Historical Perspective: Iran* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 55.

world and its politics, something that has backfired in today's interregional affairs. In addition to its strategic geographical location in the region, Iran is also a wealthy country of significant oil resources and is viewed by Arab states as pro-West. Identity, pride, and sectarian tension with Arabs have been strong through many eras of history, even as early as the Persian Empire.

The Persian Empire succeeded in structuring the empire through developing the earliest banks, labor-wages systems, agricultural care and foresting, and architecture. According to Aramajani, the Persian king who had the absolute power, followed a liberal method in governing its people: "The Persians did not impose their religion or customs upon the conquered people...Their tolerance and flexibility was implemented through a superb system of administration."<sup>69</sup> As a result, the prosperous empire faded because of Islam. The spread of Islamic ideology and its proposed lifestyle caused confusion and opposition, but the aim of rebuilding the empire seems had been revisited through the empire of the Safavid.

The Safavid came into dominance of the region by 1500. They were very passionate about Shi'ism and eager to widely spread its theologies. Shi'ism during the Safavid Empire became dominant, because Shah Esmail (one of the first Shahs to rule the empire and who disapproved of the successive Sunni caliphates), claimed to be a descendent of Prophet Mohammad; therefore, they neglected the Sunnis, which meant spreading Shi'ism may have occurred unintentionally.

According to Shi'ism, males traditionally have been the leaders of the community: "The Shi'ism of [the] Safavid was of the militant "extremist" type reminiscent of the earliest Shi'ism; a belief in divine incarnation was important, the Safavid leaders were considered divine, and egalitarianism was strong. ...The Safavid...began to moderate their views and search for orthodox Shi'a books and leaders."<sup>70</sup> In the military, leadership was inherited from father to son, which was acceptable because it was a rooted tradition. The leader was regarded as the head of

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<sup>69</sup> Aramajani, *The Modern Nations in Historical Perspective: Iran*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 13.

religious guidance as well as the chief of military. So, when Shekh Hyder was killed by the ruler of Azerbaijan, his thirteen-year-old son Shah Esmail became the ruler and ordered retaliating military operations for his father's death: "In January fifteenth 1502, Esmail defeated the Army of Alvand Beig of Aq Qoyunlu, ruler of Azerbaijan, and seized Tabriz and made this city his capital. The Safavid went on and conquered the rest of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Khorasan; they became the strongest force in Iran, and their leader Esmail, now fifteen, was declared Shah on March 11, 1502. However, the strength of the Safavid was not sufficient to contain the tribes that resided in Iran at that time, such as the Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, and Baluchi. Shah Esmail had particularly disregarded the Sunnis, so the Safavid had these tribes keep their own tribal leaders, but they maintained the central rulers for Persia. The Empire had militarily succeeded in its expansion through conquests.

#### **A. THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION: THE ROOTS FOR THE REGIONAL SHI'A IDENTITY**

This thesis sees the Iranian Revolution as a product of the political motive to overthrow the Shah and not to establish an Islamic regime. Defending Islam and the Islamic identity was a cover for the revolution leaders used to gain public support. And, in supporting this, the Iranian constitution provided another excuse to bring Khomeini into power: he was a Shi'a. It was, then, Khomeini who stretched the cover of Islamic state structure and Shi'ism to gain power, expand, and influence politics domestically and regionally.

During the twentieth century, the drafting and implementation of the Iranian constitution determined its future religious and political governance style by Shi'a Islamic laws. The constitution supported *velayat-e-faqih*, or the ruling of the jurist. The Iranian constitution was first implemented in 1906 by a clergy: it remained obedient to Islamic laws and only it favored one of the Shi'a schools. Therefore, the constitution forced a radical lifestyle on Iranians, who have a more liberal political history. However, there was the call for identity and nationalism to be made more prominent. The Shah, Reza Khan, who ruled from 1925 to 1941, had succeeded in gaining popularity by taking the first initiative toward bringing significance to the country's identity by changing its

name from Persia to Iran. Yet, his popularity had also grown to be a strong dominant personality internally. Regardless of his enthusiasm and aim in pronouncing the Iranian identity, he was not able to get rid of the Soviets who at the time controlled nearly half of northern Iran while the British were in Iraq, just south of Iran. Surely, once the tensions, which led to World War I, started to intensify between the British and the Soviets, Khan was forced to give-up his position: “The next Anglo-Soviet move was to force Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his 22-year-old son...[H]e was sent to exile...and died in Johannesburg, in 1944.”<sup>71</sup>

The new Shah countered what his father had done in order to strengthen Iran. The new Shah was very young, and external influences and political changes in the region were major. The new Shah, M. Reza Pahlavi, had become reliant and dependent on the foreign powers for support, including the United States, for nearly 35 years. The turning point in nationalist attitude that had started to build under Reza, the father, against the condescending and pro-Westerners Iran was not well-tolerated. Iranians perceived this as a serious threat to their religious beliefs: “Feelings of inferiority, deep resentment, and prudent obsequiousness to the strong are reflected in Iranian attitudes toward both powerful nations and their own destinies.”<sup>72</sup> Some serious domestic events forced the inexperienced Shah to reflect and make radical changes; he improved the economic system by reforming, financing, and developing farms and pasture lands. However, the Shah excluded political reforms; therefore, there was a lack of political participation and institutions.

In addition to the political suppression some clergyman had felt during the Shah’s rule, in 1963 a strong opposition rose in some mosques, which resented and did not financially benefit from the radical economic reforms. Iran has been a true example in modern political history as it constantly tries to battle a fine segregation between state and religious ruling. But, this also means Iran is domestically fragile. The Shah then had showed its weakness by standing up for some powerful clergymen and by continuing to

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<sup>71</sup> John D. Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

be dependent on foreign political support: “The political evolution of Iran’s revolution is the story of the emergence of an opposition despite the regime’s efforts first to preempt and then to counter it.”<sup>73</sup> Some literature also suggests that it was the Shah’s own doing that weakened him, as he dominated his government nearly in a dictatorial fashion. Eventually, growing resentment toward the Shah led to some extreme violent acts and uprisings, including those against foreigners residing in Iran—among which were the American students at Tehran University.

It was the Ayatollah Khomeini who sought the opportunity to rebel against the Shah and his not-so-Islamic style of rule. The popularity of Khomeini, who invited his followers to join him in the name of “martyrdom” to save Islamic identity and the country, was also largely growing, especially when the Shah implemented a policy of liberalization, which countered conservative Islam: “[I]ncessant chanting of ‘Allaho Akbar’ (God is Great) and ‘Khomeini Rahbaranieh’ (Khomeini Is Our Leader).”<sup>74</sup> Thus, the anti-West revolution and the restricted Iranian constitution (the ruler of the country must be of the *twelver*-Shi’ism [a sect of Shi’a believes that there shall be twelve rulers to lead Islam, and it is the twelfth who would bring *umma* to justice and true Islam])<sup>75</sup> resulted in replacing the Shah with Ayatollah Khomeini. Hence, the new regime to govern Iran abruptly changed to a radical one in a political shift that changed politics domestically and regionally. Though, if politicians viewed the Shah’s autocratic way of governing as an error that led to increased opposition, then Khomeini would have practiced the same style, except it was legitimized through Shi’ism.

Although the Shah understood Iran’s sensitive geographical location, he aimed to maintain good relationships with neighboring countries, especially the Arab states. Khomeini, however, kept provoking these ties, especially with Saudi Arabia: “[T]he ideological challenge from Iran took two forms: that of attacking the Saudi regime as incompatible with true Islam and that of accusing the Saudis of being a forward base of

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<sup>73</sup> Stempel, *Inside the Iranian Revolution*, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>75</sup> Sabrina Mervin, *The Shi’a Worlds and Iran* (Saint Paul, MN: CPI Mackays, 2010).

American imperialism in the Middle East.”<sup>76</sup> There were a number of Iranian attempts to expand their revolution to the Arab world, until the breakout of the Iraq-Iran War in 1980.

## **B. THE IRAQ-IRAN WAR: THE SHI'A IDENTITY VERSUS ARAB NATIONAL IDENTITY**

The Iranian new revolution and its radical Shi'a leader were unwelcome in Iraq as much as they were in Saudi Arabia. However, Iraq had more reasons to act aggressively toward Iran. Internally, the relatively new Iraqi regime headed by Saddam Hussein was battling *al-Da'wa* party (or the “Call” party, which is a Shi'a party that called for an Islamic state; *umma*). Also, three small islands in the Persian Gulf were claimed by both Iraq and Iran, and their official territorial nationalism had not been determined; this added to the tensions. The mutual religious ties and loyalty that Khomeini had with high-ranked Iraqi Shi'a clergies also created tension. It was normal for Saudi to be the first of the Arab countries to side with Iraq, although the main reason was the actual Iranian threat to the Saudi inter-political stability, but Saudi assured Iraq that it was going to support it in the name of “Arab brotherhood.” Other Gulf and Arab states followed the Saudis' position in regard to Iraq. The Iraq-Iran War brought the region into a bipolar power struggle; it include not only the two countries involved, but also divided the region into two sides: pro-Saddam and pro-Khomeini (the latter included Syria, Democratic Republic of Yemen, Algeria, and Libya).

Khomeini continued his preaching about Islamic laws and the Shi'a identity. He turned to his colleagues at Najaf *hawza* (a Shi'a religious school) and continued to use the war as a *holy war* against anti-Islam, undertaken by Saddam's regime: “Khomeini had managed to turn the war into an Iranian national crusade, with Saddam Hussein the Satan who had to be cast out.”<sup>77</sup> Khomeini's persistence in highlighting his ties to Iraqi Shi'a increased the Ba'athist agony toward Shi'a; the Iraqi government often accused Iraqi Shi'a of being loyal to Iran. As a result, Shi'a celebrations and rituals became forbidden

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<sup>76</sup> Barry M. Rosen, *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985), 56.

<sup>77</sup> Farouk-Sluglett and Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958 from Revolution to Dictatorship*, 2001, 259.

in Iraq, popular Shi'a leaders and their followers were killed, and thousands of Shi'a were sent to exile in Iran, accused of being loyal to Iran or of Iranian origin. Khomeini's actions during the Iraq-Iran War certainly did not help Shi'a in Iraq; in fact, it regressed them politically, socially, and economically. Furthermore, both Iraqi and Iranian armies were fighting along the shared southern border of Iraq, which happens to be mostly populated by Shi'a. It is recorded that some of the bloodiest battles were naturally those that occurred in the border lands.

Khomeini started to address all Shi'a in the Arab region. He succeeded in raising the opposition to the Shi'a minorities in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi. It is then when Khomeini became the voice of Shi'a and was regarded by many Shi'a as the *Imam* or religious leader. Shi'ism and the Shi'a identity was not the only aspect Khomeini attempted to stir as a means of causing political instability in the Arab region; he also accused a number of Arab leaders as being "dependents" of the United States, and as a result unable to make any decision on their own. He repeatedly reminded Muslim Arabs that their political systems (mostly socialists) adopted a foreign ideology that was alien and conflicts with Islamic beliefs. Nevertheless, the minorities of Arab Shi'a had been preconditioned to such a rival against their governments and responds positively to Khomeini's messages—they were treated as minority groups, with little, if any, political representation. Therefore, all uprisings were put down by Arab governments.

Although the Iranian government had some success in agitating Arab Shi'a and leading them to rise in opposition against their governments, it also inflicted growing opposition on itself. The regime became radical Islamist that forced a restricted lifestyle upon its citizens: "[T]he regime's puritanical policies [included] the banning of music and entertainment programs on television and radio, and the requirement of the *hijab* (Islamic dress) for women."<sup>78</sup> In addition to the state's restraining policies, the Iranian economy regressed despite its oil exports, mainly due to war cost, but also due to Iran's deteriorated foreign affairs, especially its relations with members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, whose most members were pro-Saddam. The new

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<sup>78</sup> Rosen, *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*, 75.

political and economic restraints led many middle class families to flee the country; they were “members of the managerial sector.”<sup>79</sup>

The Iraq-Iran War highlighted the failure of the Iranian Revolution and its regime; it eventually prevented it from expanding, which was the hope of Khomeini. Most important, the war brought the regions’ relations into focus, especially those of Iran–Arab and Iran–non-Muslim countries. However, the war also indicated the possibility of sectarian politics in the region; the Shi’a demographic and population percentage in the region is a factor that should be considered when examining politics of the Middle East. The war may have been the first incident that caused the uprising of Shi’a in various parts of the region, but it was insufficient to motivate a sectarian identity.

### **C. THE SHI’A IDENTITY: A CONTROL MECHANISM**

This thesis finds that the Shi’a identity rivals (in Iraq and Lebanon) are used as a mechanism to empower, restrain, and influence political powers in the region. The period after the Iraq-Iran War, especially after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003, has been a real test of the Shi’a identity and its endurance in the region’s politics. The outcome of many political and military incidents in the region can be simplified in the form of a *right triangle* that represents the Shi’a ties in Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The descriptive definition of a right triangle is intended in this context: because Iran has been the major power and the steering wheel (directly or indirectly) for Shi’a movements in the area, it is the 90-degree angle that composes one half of the triangle. Iraq and Hezbollah combined make up the other one half.

When American forces overthrew Saddam and dissolved the Iraqi military and its high-ranked officers, there was resentment among Saddam’s supporters, who were Sunnis. The resulting conflict between the Iraqi Sunnis and the American forces, and the accumulated ambition of the Iraqi Shi’a for power, granted them the ultimate opportunity to achieve their goal. Iran, too, sought this imminent opportunity to distract the United States and veer its attention away from Iran. Hence, Iran relied on its Shi’a identity to destabilize the presence of American forces in Iraq, establish a Shi’a support model that

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<sup>79</sup> Rosen, *Iran Since the Revolution: Internal Dynamics, Regional Conflict, and the Superpowers*, 75.



would motivate the Shi'a in other Arab states, and possibly threaten Israel with a possible Shi'a front alliance against it. The actions of Iran were not random. In fact, Iran relied on past events in implementing its strategy in the Middle East. For example, the Iranian Revolution had succeeded because of numerous uprisings in a number of Arab countries (Kuwait, Saudi, and Bahrain) incited by Khomeini in which Shi'a groups rose against their governments. Most Gulf Shi'a are led by Iraqi *marja'iyya* (a religious source) who completed their education in one of the *hawzas* in Najaf south of Iraq, and then were sent off to a Gulf state. Therefore, Iran's influence on Iraqi Shi'a clergymen indirectly influences the Shi'a groups in the region. Hezbollah has proved itself a capable militia power that can militarily threaten or destabilize Israel when supported by Iran.

Studies of Iraq-Iran Shi'a relations are a strong indication that Iran has used its Shi'a pride to connect and influence Iraqi Shi'a and *not* form a unity with them. As the Iraqi Shi'a took power, there was an inevitable Shi'a division that was due to political and Shi'ism methodology, rank of the *marja'iyya*, and an interesting concern, the *marja'iyya's* national loyalty. Iraqi Shi'a encountered a new dilemma once they reached power: two scholars of high religious rank with completely different approaches to politics. Ayatollah Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the Shi'a scholars, whose father was murdered on Saddam's orders, wanted to claim power in Iraq. However, his methodology for fighting the Americans, and wanting revenge against the Sunni, made him less popular. Moreover, because of his success in forming his own army to fight against the Americans in Iraq, he was sent to exile in Iran, where he spent much of his young adulthood; as a result, he is often perceived as the executer of Iran's agenda in Iraq. Later, he tried to counteract these allegations by emphasizing his natural birth as an Arab rather than that of his popular counter, Ali al-Sistani.<sup>80</sup> But, it was evident that Sadr needed Iran's support to carry out his plans, and so he received Iranian support: "Encouraged by the Iranian backing and money, Sadr shifted from familial-populist politics to radical

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<sup>80</sup> Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008).

fundamentalism in line with Iranian plans to create a broad Islamic condition from Lebanon to the West Bank and Iraq.”<sup>81</sup>

The other scholar is Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who has a more moderate approach. He sees his role as a scholar is to protect and defend the faith and not to govern it. Unlike Sadr, al-Sistani supported the American forces’ entry to Iraq in an exchange for governing the country. He did not get involved in Iran’s politics and received the disapproval of his Iranian colleagues for his position. But, in Iraq, he “...took his stand on the principle of majority rule and demanded accountable and representative government that would reflect and protect Shi’a identity.”<sup>82</sup> Al-Sistani wants to support and maintain the Shi’a identity; however, he was not supported by Iran until recently after his popularity started to grow domestically and regionally. Despite the Shi’a division in Iraq, Iran played no role, nor were there any attempts to unify Iraqi Shi’a. Iran did not call for unity among the divided Iraqi Shi’a; rather, Iran supports the Shi’a leader who would support its objective of power and control of Iraq.

On the other hand, in Lebanon, Hezbollah is subjugated to Iran’s objectives in the region. In fact, initially Hezbollah was regarded as an Iranian militia. Its nationalism and loyalty was under severe scrutiny by Lebanese and Arabs in general. Moreover, Hezbollah was only recognized as an Arab-Lebanese resistance force after it had won the war against Israel in the summer of 2006. Nevertheless, Hezbollah considers Iran as its idol in being structured as an Islamic state. Similarly, Iran has been supportive of Hezbollah: “In Hezbollah’s case the issue of *marja’iyya* has been determined on the doctrinal-ideological basis of following the official [*marja’iyya*] in Iran...Hezbollah’s religious authority was and will continue be the Iranian *al-wali al-faqih*...especially, after Khomeini appointed [himself] as Hezbollah’s *godfather*.”<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Hezbollah, as discussed previously, relies on Iran’s financial support. Although both Hezbollah and Amal in Lebanon obtain their finances through charity and dues from Muslim Shi’a,

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<sup>81</sup> Halas Jaber, *Hezbollah Born with a Vengeance* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>82</sup> Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 173.

<sup>83</sup> Mervin, *The Shi'a Worlds and Iran*, 97.

Hezbollah has advanced over Amal because of the financial support it receives from Iran, which is estimated in the millions of dollars annually. Thus, Hezbollah's popularity depends on its capabilities, militarily and financially. However, both of Hezbollah's capabilities rely on the Iran's support.

Iran has used its Shi'a identity to influence other Shi'a groups in the region to steer social and political shifts to its advantage. At the same time, by supporting these groups, Iran receives their support in return because they can apply pressure on their local governments when there is a call for it. That Shi'a scholars receive their religious education either in Najaf, Iraq, or Qom, Iran, will always allow for Shi'a networking, and thus, building ties with Shi'a in other countries.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

As this thesis examines Shi'a history in Iran, it finds that Iran's history is full of pride and numerous achievements, and the Shi'a identity is only a mechanism for Iran to gain control. Iran was the Persian Empire before the arrival of Islam, and once again became an empire after Islam in the Safavid era. That the Safavid were Shi'a was because of the demography of the then-Empire. Once in leadership, the Safavid used the religion and the Shi'a sect in particular, because they were the population's majority, to gain control, succeed, and expand. For long period, Iran lived prosperously and liberally. For centuries, there were few state-religion conflicts. But, it was understandable for Iran to include its religion in its constitution as a form of protecting its faith from fading, especially because it was surrounded by Anglo-Soviets during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

However, although the initial inclusion of Islamic laws in the Iranian constitution was to maintain its Islamic identity, it was understandable for a state that has practiced Shi'ism to specify it as its official sect. However, only one faction of the (Shi'a sect) was included; other factions were disregarded. This meant maintaining the division within Islam, and division and suppression within the Shi'a sect. The outcome of the Iranian Revolution was one of the constitution's consequences, or at least it was used as such by Khomeini. The most important aspects of the Shi'a revival in the region were imprinted during the revolution. Khomeini's success in reaching other Shi'a groups in other Arab

countries gave those countries and the region events to consider when planning interregional affairs.

The concept of Arabs and Arab nationalism created complex Arab–Iran relations for decades. Iran, on the other hand, continues to define its nationalism and independency from the Arab world. This, too, is a complex issue for Iran; as an Islamic state, there is the learning, reading, reference, and recitation of Islam’s holy book the *Qur’an*, that is written in Arabic. The *Qur’an* is the reason the Farsi language adapted most of the Arabic script. Also, for its scholars to achieve its religious degree, clergymen must learn and understand the Arabic language. Hence, it has been challenging for Iran to maintain its separate identity without relying on another mechanism that gives its distinct identification but also links it to the region’s politics; the Shi’a identity, has become Iran’s instrument.

Although Iran influences Shi’a groups in the region, it is very selective as to who deserves its support; specifically, this thesis examines Iraq and Lebanon, where there are political divisions in local Shi’a groups. For instance, Iran supported Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq (financially and militarily) long before it supported al-Sistani, even though al-Sistani received more respect and approval of local and other Shi’a scholars. In Lebanon, Iran supported and continues to support Hezbollah (financially and militarily), while disregarding Amal, whose founder came to Lebanon to revive the Shi’a per call and support from Lebanon. What Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon have in common is they are have younger fighters, are anti-West and anti-Israel, and have succeeded in destabilizing their countries when Iran needed them to. Iran continues to exploit its mechanisms in other countries of the region where applicable: “The birth of Hezbollah in the Gulf is part of the same attempt by Iran to control the revolutionary zeal of Gulf Shi’a so that it does not endanger its diplomatic relations with its neighbors but can also be a useful tool of pressure if needed.”<sup>84</sup> Hence, Iran’s mechanism of Shi’a identity is to win those in surrounding countries to protect it and serve its interests in the region.

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<sup>84</sup> Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, 211.

## V. CONCLUSION

This thesis finds that the formation of a Shi'a unified force or power presented in the ideology of a Shi'a Crescent between Shi'a in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran is unlikely, and thus, no threat is to be feared. However, this thesis also concludes that the Shi'a identity is a mechanism that will continue to challenge the region's politics and that this mechanism is on the rise. The research focused on three factors: sociopolitical representation, socioeconomic oppression, and the Shi'a identity. The summary of the case study comparison is as follows.

Political and sociopolitical discrimination in Iraq was created by a foreign occupancy, but then used by the Ba'athist party. Iraq's geopolitical and regional historical sectarian conflicts allowed for much of its political discrimination against the Shi'a. It is a country uniquely located near both Turkey and Iran; Turkey has a Sunni majority and Iran has a Shi'a majority. The Ottomans were insecure about allowing Shi'a to receive education or join the military; the Ba'athists had a similar fear, especially during the Iraq-Iran War.

In Lebanon, the Shi'a situation is best described by the "domino effect" theory: the political underrepresentation of Shi'a led to a decline or lack of national and regional networks, and consequently, a decline in their social and economic status. The Lebanese Shi'a remained passive until they were awakened by Sadr when he arrived from Iraq. In Iran, however, political presentation, power, and authority have been granted to Shi'a for centuries, almost since the arrival of Islam. Iranian Shi'a are the majority in the country. This Islamic country follows the Shi'a methodology, and despite the presence of other religions and Muslim sects, has a constitution that guarantees them absolute political power. On the socioeconomic level, once again Iraq's geography and demography raised domestic and regional fears of the Shi'a; thus, they became victims of underdevelopment. That Iraqi Shi'a are concentrated in the southern provinces of Iraq, where oil fields and water gates to Gulf water are, alerted successive Iraqi governments of the need to be in total control of the Shi'a as a means of preventing them from gaining

control of the country's natural resources—especially when these natural resources are located on the border with Iran.

The Lebanese Shi'a were neglected economically, socially, and politically because they were illiterate farmers who mainly lived on the Lebanese border with Syria and therefore were less of an interest to Lebanon's government. Iran has been financially supportive of the Shi'a community in Lebanon, although specifying that this aid is for Hezbollah and its followers.

Even though Iran is a prosperous country, it suffered major economic setbacks that were the result of the country's policies; for example, a long war with Iraq that called for advanced military training and armament. The outcome of these incidents was that many Iranian middle-class families fled the country, creating a shift in the society's social classes. In terms of the economy, this has not affected the Shi'a only, but rather the entire country with all its ethnic and religious groups.

The Shi'a identity is strong and the common factor in this case study; however, its significance is manipulated by Iran. Iran has been using the Shi'a identity factor since the 1979 revolution. It was raised for the first time by Khomeini, who needed to benefit from the instability of other countries in the region for his war against Saddam and Saddam's Arab allies. Despite the active Da'wa party in Iraq, initially Da'wa was calling for the Islamic state and the importance of maintaining Islamic laws and traditions. The formation of Da'wa may well have been inspired by other anti-West occupation by Islamic parties in the region at the time. But, it was Khomeini who succeeded in reminding Shi'a in other countries of their distinguished identity. The consequence of the call for this in Iraq was Lebanon. The Ba'athists' fear of a possible continuation of the Iranian Revolution led them to continuing actions that increased the ties between the Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a. As a result, the Ba'athists either murdered Shi'a clerics in Iraq or deported them to Iran by accusing them of being of Iranian origins. They also demanded the end of intercultural marriage between Iraqis and Iranians. Additionally, they prevented Shi'a and Shi'a intellectuals from achieving higher positions in either the government or the military, even though Shi'a soldiers fought against Iran during the Iraq-Iran War.

In Lebanon, the arrival of Sadr from Iraq and his success in reviving the Shi'a community affected the Lebanese loyalty to their religious leaders, whether they were from Lebanon, Iraq, or Iran. The Iranian support of Hezbollah has continued since the establishment of the party. The financial support included that of all the followers of Hezbollah in Lebanon. This powerful support and Hezbollah's military actions against Israel provide the Lebanese Shi'a the power, assertion, and strength they have longed for. Thus, the Shi'a in Iraq and Lebanon were forced by their rulers and by domestic politics to believe that they belonged to Iran because their main loyalty is to Shi'ism rather than their home countries.

However, this thesis finds that Iran has been the beneficiary of politically and ideologically-guided regional politics. Iran uses sectarian differences to maintain and strengthen its power in the region, but not to form a Shi'a unity.

First, historical evidence indicates that, throughout different periods of history, Iran attempted to control the region by establishing or expanding an empire (the Persian Empire). Second, Iran has been very selective about which Shi'a group it provides support to. It supported Da'wa in Iraq during Saddam's rule because the party was anti-Saddam. Then, it supported Muqtada al-Sadr because it was a militia group that fought American and international forces in Iraq. And it supported Hezbollah rather than Amal in Lebanon because Hezbollah, too, is a militia fighting Israel. Then, Iran's support to the Shi'a went to the parties and militia groups that had helped Iran in the past and could provide assistance when needed. The form of assistance Iran receives from these Shi'a groups has been military or as actors used to destabilize the region.

Third, the Shi'a sect is divided into a number of factions. Each faction differs in its ideology and interpretation of Shi'ism. Therefore, before a more complex unification, such as the Shi'a Crescent can occur, there would be a need to unify the Shi'a ideology, which is already challenged. Because Iran adapts only to one ideology as it is conditioned per its constitution, there is no evidence of Iran attempting to raise concern about unifying the Shi'a sect. Iran has no interest in unifying the sect or reaching a larger union.

Fourth, the Muslim sectarian conflict between the Sunni and Shi'a is a prolonged and continuing dilemma. It is unlikely that Muslim Sunnis, who are mostly concentrated west of the Red Sea, will allow a Shi'a unification, because it could mean dividing the region into three militarily and politically powerful countries; Iran, Israel, and Egypt.

The Shi'a Crescent is an ill-conceived term, assumed to be a without evidence. Historical analysis finds the development of a Shi'a Crescent or regional Shi'a unity unlikely. While such unity is unlikely, there is evidence that Iran has used Shi'a identity to influence regional groups and states. Given the historical evidence, its success in this endeavor does not appear imminent.



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